

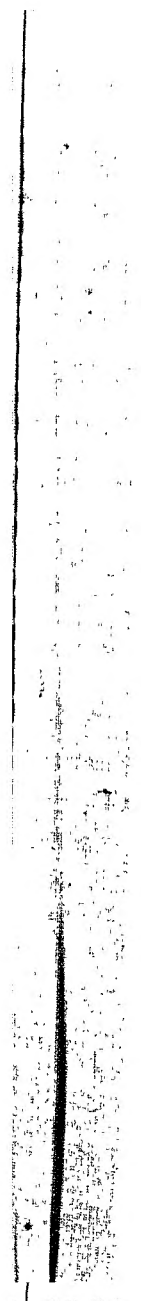
GIVE
ME MY
ROBE

URSULA
LEIGH

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GIVE ME MY ROBE

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

CHINOOK

*Has also written under the
name of*

URSULA GWYNN

IF THIS BE LOVE, ETC.

URSULA LEIGH

GIVE ME MY ROBE



Give me my robe, put on my crown ;
I have Immortal longings in me.

—*Anthony and Cleopatra.*

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—
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To
MY SISTER
CELESTINA BRAY



CHAPTER I

THE two rode close together where the track was sufficiently wide. The man knew they had come a little too far and that his doggedness in fighting the pain in his side would not hold out for more than another mile or two. He had postponed the day too long. The sun was setting and the knowledge bore down upon him that he would never see it rise again. As they had ridden along the track through the pine-woods he had felt, now and again, as though he was suffocating and had prayed that they might soon come to the open when the breeze blowing across the Prairie might revive him. He was glad now that he had taken that last look behind him at the shack. If it hadn't been for Hannah he would have stayed there and been content to die alone in the place where he had felt his spirit, as it were, emerging from the body which had been tormenting him with agonies this year past.

After glancing behind him he had held his head erect and looked into the distance, for he knew that Hannah, imagining him thinking deeply,

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would not speak to him. The track had begun to descend and lead away from the pine-woods towards the valley which lay ahead of them. The river was moving swiftly over the stone-studded bed. They had begun to hear the rush of it a little way back. The sun cast rays of crimson, like accordion pleats, between the pine-trees, across the track. Hannah glanced up at him. She saw his lips moving. He looked down at her. She had taken off her stetson and was carrying it under her arm. Her fair hair just touched her shoulder blades. A lump came in his throat. He pulled gently at his horses' reins. Hannah's horse came to a standstill. She laid her hand on his arm. He was looking down the valley at the river and ahead where the town lay. A number of miles, and he knew now that he would never reach as far. He seemed to sag in the saddle. The girl pressed his arm.

"Steve," she said, "for Mercy's sake why don't you give in. Come back as far as the trees and I'll lay the rug out."

He nodded. She turned her horses' head and took hold of his rein, leading him alongside of her.

"I reckon," she said, "I've got some sense allowing you to have your way—riding these miles when you ought to be in your bed."

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"I was wilful, it's not your fault, Honey."

"Sure you were," she said, "there's no mistake about that."

A curious sensation passed over her, for she was superstitious and this sudden turning back boded no good. "Maybe, after an hour or so," she said, "you'll be able to move on so's we can get down to the river track. It wouldn't take me long to get into town myself——" She paused. "Maybe I could get an auto." While she spoke the fear came into her mind that any suggestion she might make was superfluous. Yet he had given her no hint that he was too ill to get as far as the town where he was to consult the doctor. She did not know that there was any cause to be afraid of what might be wrong. But now she was full of fear. Quite suddenly and irrevocably. She had seen him take that last look behind him as they had ridden out of sight of the shack. There had been something final in the way he had shut up his Bible the night before after reading a chapter, as he always did. As he had ridden along, sometimes beside her, sometimes leading ahead where the track was narrow, she had seen his lips moving when he was, she knew, repeating under his breath, countless verses of the Psalms. There was so much grandeur about him as well as strength, and it

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seemed to her that as his strength failed him so his grandeur increased, for it was easy to see that the pain was unbearable and yet he was resisting it with unbelievable fortitude. She reined in her horse and dropping the reins she dismounted and went round to Steve's side. She looked up at him. His face had paled under the bronze skin. She took a swift look round her. The sun had gone and the sky was a deep crimson between the pine-trees now. The valley was turning to a deep blue and it looked almost dark down the side of the hill. It was another thirty miles to the town—twenty from the shack—and this way they had come was the most isolated: there were no other farms within five miles. When he got off his horse he was scarcely able to stand. If twenty miles had done him in, how could he do the other thirty? A breeze had sprung up and fanned them as they stood by their horses. Hannah put her arm round his waist. He did not seem to tower over her as he usually did if she stood beside him. She began to lead him under a pine-tree and made him sit there while she went back and unstrapped the rug from the saddle. She laid it on the ground and making him lie down on it she wrapped it round him. Fetching the rug which was rolled and strapped to her own horse she placed it under Steve's head

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and then produced a flask of water which was fastened to her belt. Surely people didn't die like this when they hadn't seemed too bad an hour before. Yet she kept seeing in her mind—like slow-motion pictures being shown separately—Steve turning his head and taking that last look at the shack, his shutting of the Bible the night before with that curious finality and this turning back and retracing their steps a few moments before. She had spent all her life on the Prairie; the silence had never appalled her. She had once heard that there was so much to fear on the Prairie that it was no use being afraid. It was like a soldier in battle not having to think about death because it was all around him. There was really no reason to get scared just because Steve had been sick and wasn't up to the ride into the town. After a rest the pain would go off and he'd feel better. Then they could continue on their way as soon as the dawn broke. She would collect some twigs and branches and get a fire going. If anybody happened to be around riding from the town or rustling any cattle, they'd see the smoke. If they had been home at the shack she'd be cooking the supper for the two of them. There had been times when she had got tired doing that year in, year out and Steve hardly letting her stir from the place. But

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she would like to be back there now while he was looking so queer. She sat beside him and took up one of his hands in hers. It seemed cold. He started to speak to her.

“Hannah—in an hour’s time there’ll be a moon.”

“Maybe, but anyway, it doesn’t matter much, I reckon I’ll light a fire and keep it going.”

“As soon as the moon gets up, you start off again.”

“And leave you? No, sir.”

“It’ll be tit for tat, Hannah, I’m leaving you.”

She was silent for a minute, then, taking a deep breath, she said: “It’s jest that you’re feeling queer. You’re bad, I know: by and by, you’ll feel more up to the ride, and as soon as we get into the town they’ll get you right.”

“I did wrong in leaving the shack—I should have let you ride in alone.”

“What’s the good of a ride alone to me, Steve, there ain’t much in riding or living without you; you can’t leave me.”

She looked down at him. Every feature she knew so well. The thin aquiline nose, the high cheekbones, the level brows. They were ill-assorted, if one thought of them as possible companions.

“Seems as though I must, Hannah, but when a thing happens this way it’s all planned. If I had taken the trip a week ago ’twouldn’t have

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made any difference, only it'd have seemed harder that's all. It's mighty hard to leave you, Hannah."

She held on to his hand. He went on: " 'Twouldn't do if we faced things all along and then got scared when the big thing comes. You remember all the things I've told you? "

" Sure I do, Steve."

" Courage," he told her, and this over and over again, " is the thing that you've got to go on mixing into yourself like the eggs you put into a batter. It counts for everything. There wouldn't be no wasters in the world, no skunks, none of them as you see wasting their lives in the towns if they was to learn courage at school same as other things. I don't mean fighting with their fists and hiding fear when they feel a bit scared of someone bigger than themselves, but the courage you've got to have to fight the thing that's in you that makes you scared to do what's right 'cause it's so mighty hard. Counts for women same as men."

He stopped quite suddenly and his hand tightened and then relaxed in hers. Hannah leant over him, " Don't talk," she said, " keep quiet. You know, I've half a mind to ride hard as I can and get someone from the town."

" No use, Hannah, only, see here, I don't mind dying alone and that bit of pain wasn't so bad."

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"For Mercy's sake, don't keep talking of dying, 't isn't like you to give in."

"I'm not giving in—the big thing's come and I'm not for shirking, that's all. I'm not afraid, but it's you, Hannah. I should have been thinking of that before but I didn't know how bad things were. Even if I'd never come out of the hospital I'd reckoned I'd have had time to go to the bank——" He held on to her hand again and stiffened himself till he seemed rigid under the blanket. When his body relaxed he lay still with his eyes closed. His hands were colder. Hannah slipped off the corduroy coat she was wearing and laid it over him. Then she started picking up twigs and pine-cones and placed them in a heap a few yards away from where Steve was lying. The wind which had got up suddenly died down again and the dusk deepened. She tethered the horses and unhitched the grip with the remainder of the lunch they had brought with them from Steve's saddle. Steve was lying perfectly still. She couldn't make out how he could have gone under so suddenly. He had broken up this past year and it was she who had first said to him that he might as well get into town and see a doctor. So many of the men who lived hard on the Prairie seemed to break up when they were middle-aged

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but that was more often when they had drunk more than was good for them and gone into town for a bust whenever they got a few dollars together. He wouldn't say he was leaving her now unless he knew it for certain. "There's no such thing," he had often told her, "as 'going under,' not unless you wish. Makes me sick to see a feller getting drunk 'cause something's gone wrong or another feller's done him a mean trick—that's not going to help him. Be mighty glad that you ain't the mean feller that's what I say and feel as sorry for him as you know how."

The smoke rose from the fire in a straight grey line and the twigs crackled so that Steve opened his eyes. She sat down beside him and put her hand under the corduroy coat. She supposed there was nothing to do but to sit beside him like this and watch him die. There was nothing she could do for the man who meant everything to her. She possessed nothing in the world but the memory of the affection and the care he had given her ever since she could remember. He had spoken a short while back of going to the bank. She knew he had never anything but a small deposit there, for he was one of those whose crops failed on every possible occasion. The shack—even though he had added to it—was still a shack and could never

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be counted as a ranch. But it was only for a moment that her thoughts turned to any material loss Steve's going might mean to her—he was the one thing that counted, the one security she had ever known. He had guarded her so that none of the men whom she had met on the Prairie had ever dared to make any advances to her, in his presence. If ever one had approached her Steve had been on the alert and talking to her of the sort of man he would, in time, consider worthy of looking twice at her. Sometimes she had thought his ideas a bit fantastic and yet she had to admit he knew the nature of the men around them and amongst them he seemed to stand out as something much finer than any of them. He had no use for women and yet for the past fifteen years he had sheltered her and lived for her. She realised now how constant his thought had been for her; how unfailing his care. And he was leaving her. She leaned over him and started to call him. He opened his eyes which had been closed for some little time. He saw the fear in her eyes. He said: "Be sensible, Honey, ride into the town—and here—there are things I must tell you."

"I'm not frightened—I'll stay right here."

"I've wronged you, Hannah, there's women

that'd been your friends and I always sent them flying——”

“Don't you worry : I've got no use for women --no, sir.”

“Men's no good to you now, for the Land's sake, Hannah——”

“Men ain't going to worry me any.”

“You don't know, and out in this country you meet them whichever way you turn. Don't you marry any man that isn't straight.”

“That's all right, Steve, maybe I won't marry at all—I reckon any man'd seem a funny sort of guy after you.”

Something choked her. It was dark now. The fire had burnt down. There was still a thin line of smoke going up but she must put more wood on it for the smell and the sight of it helped her to keep her nerve.

“You'll remember it all——” A light came into his eyes. “Keep straight on and things don't seem to come so hard after a time—it's just at first.”

“Sure,” she told him, “it's jest at first.”

“Are you holding my hand, Hannah ? ”

“Sure, I'm holding your hand—what did you think ? ”

For a long time then he didn't speak and she sat beside him holding his hands, rubbing

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them, knowing that no rubbing would ever get them warm again. The moon had risen and showed the horses tethered to the pine tree. They stood silhouetted against the sapphire of the sky, the saddles on the ground. There was no sound. She thought she heard in the distance the river as it rushed along the valley, but sometimes, in a silence, one imagined one heard sounds such as water rushing or twigs snapping. It seemed as though you listened and heard with something more than the ears in your head. Steve seemed to be taking little short downward breaths now: they sounded like distant puffs from the Mail leaving a dépôt a long way off. He was trying to speak. In the time that was left to the two of them they seemed to look at each other as though the memory of each other must never fade. He had in the years gone by watched her features change from the child's to the girl's, and just lately he had noticed how mature she had seemed to grow in face and figure. She had seen and heard little of the world, but what the Prairie taught age could quicker, he reckoned, than the world, beyond it. The expression in the men's eyes, and the women's as well, told you a deal more than anyone might who had lived twice as long in the city, though you mightn't

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find out here the same loyalty and sacrifice. The Prairie might seem banishment to some who had to live their lives there but it was Sanctuary to others. Steve had shown hospitality to the community around them, which consisted of all sorts and conditions of men. Seeing him lie motionless like this under the blanket and her corduroy coat over him, Hannah imagined him back at the shack, standing in a group of boys from the ranches round, towering over any of them, his shoulders broader than any of theirs, his immense hand round the neck of a bottle, pouring them out their drinks in turn. What would they say when they heard that he had gone out like this? Perhaps some of them had guessed in the past year that there was something the matter. He had often looked queer, though Hannah reckoned he had never let any of them see him when he had been at his worst. Every now and again he seemed so terribly still and then he would open his eyes and look full into hers. As long as she lived—wherever she went, she would see his vivid blue eyes looking at her. He wanted to tell her something but now he was beyond speech. Every now and again she felt she wanted to ride as hard as she could into the town and fetch someone out. But would there be time? She had heard of people

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dying—lingering for a day or two, however near the end they seemed to be. But then she felt she couldn't leave him, however much she shirked watching him die here all alone, so far from everyone. He might think she had quitted because she couldn't stand staying by his side. The night seemed long: she kept watching for the dawn. Presently it crept over the hill. A pale yellow light, at first, which gradually flooded the sky and filled the valley with a golden mist. She had hardly realised that all this time she had been holding Steve's hands in hers and that hers were almost as frozen as his. The river now was shining with the light from the rising sun on it. She wondered whether, after all, she had slept, for she could hardly believe that she had been sitting there for hours beside Steve, without moving. She had noticed that for a long time he had not opened his eyes. She touched his face. It was as cold as his hands—colder. He had left her and she had not known the moment of his going. She was alone. She looked down the valley: at the stretch of Prairie beyond that lay between her and the town. What good now to ride as far? Better to turn in the direction of the shack or get to the Duncans' farm and he would get some of the boys to help him bring Steve back. Maybe they would bury

him on the side of the hill overlooking the valley. She relaxed the hold on his hands. She was glad they were covered over with the rug for his hands had been such a feature of his : and she could not have borne to have looked at them for the last time. One of the horses was whinneying. She had forgotten all about the horses. For a moment she could not rise from the ground, her legs had got so cramped. She was kneeling by Steve's side bending over him, her hands covering her face. The tears began to pour down her cheeks. She wondered why she had not cried before. The horse was whinneying again. The sun had risen and a breeze was stirring the pine trees. She gradually got up from kneeling on the ground : then bent forward and kissed Steve on the forehead. It felt like ice against her lips. She left him then and made her way over to the horses. She saddled them both and mounted her own horse. She dared not look back and yet she felt a terrible reluctance at leaving Steve lying alone there. But the only thing was to get to James Duncan's farm and let them know what had happened.

She slipped her arm through the bridle of Steve's horse and began to wend her way down the hill and across the Prairie which led in the direction of the Duncans' farm.

CHAPTER II

FOR three miles she walked the horses, her head bent, thinking of the hours she had just lived through during the night. She saw Steve lying on the ground, his eyes closed, his great body inert under the blanket. When the memory overwhelmed her she thought of the years she had spent at the shack with him. Happy, peaceful years, uneventful, lonely in a way, for she had seldom spoken to a woman. There were a few around them who would have been willing to be her friends but Steve had had his own way and kept them at a distance. But there had always been plenty of men. Steve had always given them hospitality, letting them sleep on the floor when the spare room had been loaned to anyone. They'd all be sorry—more than sorry to hear the news, for Steve had had the respect of the whole countryside, as well as friendship. It had been good to live with a man who had nothing but good spoken of him, in these parts where wasters hung round as plentiful as gophers. She supposed the Duncans were the best people to go to. They were good

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folks but Mrs Duncan fussed a bit and Hannah felt as though a bit of fussing would break her down. She'd let the men get on with the job of burying Steve for she felt she could not bear to see them put him out of her sight for good. But after all, wouldn't that be shirking the very first thing that might be expected of her? Steve hadn't brought her up to shirk. His last talk with her had been on the kind of way she ought to face life. Life. From where now was it going to begin again? It couldn't just continue. It would be impossible for her to go on living at the shack alone. Her mind for a few moments would work quickly and then seem to remain stationary, dwelling on the past few years when she had been growing from childhood to girlhood. Sometimes Steve had brought her books and magazines from the town. After reading them she had become critical of the men who had come to the shack, recognising them as good friends and some of them attractive in their own way, but her dreams took her beyond them in imagination. The Prairie, at times when the moon was full and the sky ablaze with stars could hold romance, and standing at the door of the shack, perhaps a night when Steve might be paying a neighbour a visit, she had listened to the silence and wondered whether romance would ever come

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to her. Her life had ended on the Prairie—she felt as though it must be ended with Steve's death. She wondered what looks she possessed, for to be stared at as the men stared at her who came to the shack was no proof that you really were anything to look at. In the little square of mirror which hung in her minute room she could see little of herself. She was always aware of her blunt nose and grey eyes with the slightly slanting eyebrows and prominent cheek bones. She reined in the horses when she had ridden five miles and looked to the right, far away, where the Duncans' farm could be seen, dumped in the middle of the Prairie, looking like the trunk of a tree and no bigger. Mrs Duncan was sure to fuss, but she liked Mr Duncan and he had always been Steve's friend. To think of Steve lying there on the hill! They'd find it hard to believe that. Hannah knew they would see to everything and do their utmost for her, for they were good folks. Away to the left there was Dan Thompson's ranch, the biggest rancher around these parts, a close friend of Steve's but a man Hannah had always steered clear of. If any money had to be spent on Steve's burying, he would spend it. Hannah knew that she had only to ride to his ranch and be shown into his comfortable furnished sitting-room and ask for him

for every difficulty to be smoothed out from that time on. She had often wondered why Steve had liked him, for he was ridiculed by the other men as being a man whose pleasantness showed too much on the surface. He lived half the year round at a house he had bought on the Parade, in Redcliff, overlooking the Saskatchewan. The last time he had come out from the old country he had brought a Rolls Royce with him which he kept for use in the town. When he came out to his ranch he came in a Ford as far as Johnson's Store and rode the rest of the way. There would be no need for her to stay at the Duncans' once Steve was buried. She would tell them she would have to get into Redcliff to the bank to see to any business. She would have to find out if Steve had left any money and who could claim it. The shack too—what would become of that? She supposed, though Steve had always been so unbusinesslike, there'd be something for her until she could find somewhere to go. Even in these days, a girl could pick up a goodish job. She had left the hills and the pine trees far in the distance: ahead of her now lay mile upon mile of Prairie: she would have to ride two or three miles before she would come to the trail which led to the Duncans' farm. She began to canter now for with Steve left far behind

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she felt she wanted to get near a human being. Her loss, quite suddenly, began to impress itself on her. She had lost Steve. When someone left you on the Prairie they seemed gone for good. She could imagine if you lived in a house somewhere not feeling so lost because someone had left you. The Prairie was so vast. Your mind became the same as the Prairie, wind swept. But perhaps she felt like that on account of the shock—numb. Much as you might feel if you got shot off a horse that bucked before you were ready for him. Once she spoke to somebody she might lose this dead feeling. Here was the trail now that led to the Duncans' farm. A little further along—sharp to the right she would come in sight of their own shack way up on the hill. She might have come to her senses quicker if she rode up there: the sight of the well-known furniture, the table which she polished so carefully, the bench, made out of a long plank of maple, against the wall, near which they pulled the table when there were others to share their meal with them. The Bible, with the elastic band round it kept on the sideboard, the Willow-patterned dishes on the shelf above. Her eyes smarted. She knew that, seldom as she ever shed tears, she would shed a great many before she got the memory of Steve's body lying there under

the blanket, out of her mind, and the feel of his cold hands in hers. She heard him saying to her : “ Courage is the thing you’ve got to go on mixing into yourself —— ”

The Duncans’ farm was just ahead of her now. The idea of facing them made her catch her breath. They had seemed so far away before she had come down from the pine woods on to the plains. Nothing had ever happened in her life before to make her feel she had come to an end of things. She did not want the Duncans to know that she felt like that or they would be persuading her to stay on with them. She must make it clear to them that she must get a move on at once and find work ; it would not do to hang around and let an opportunity slip by. She knew what Mrs Duncan would suggest. Every Tom, Dick and Harry for miles around, as a possible husband. She was crazy on women getting married and working themselves to death. And Duncan would talk away in his quiet Scotch voice, persuading her to stay with them so he could make love to her whenever his wife’s back was turned. She wouldn’t have Steve now to keep the men in their place. Duncan had known that if he ever persisted in worrying her with his attentions, she would tell

Steve to get him to quit coming to the shack. She had been safe as long as Steve was about, but now she was alone. She would be a stranger in any other part of the world but this isolated bit of the Prairie and yet she had made up her mind an hour after leaving Steve that she was not going to make it any longer her home. She looked down on the ground as she cantered along and saw her shadow beside her, with her stetson on the back of her head and her hair hanging down to her shoulder blades. In her grey eyes there was a look of sensitiveness and fear but her mouth was set and determined. She could smell the smoke now as it rose from the Duncans' chimney and she heard some of the boys as they shouted to the cattle down in the corral. Duncan might be seeing to the horses further afield ; she hoped he would be and that she would find Mrs Duncan alone. She would break the news to the others and they could ride to the farms and the ranches around—Hannah would insist on the dagoes being told however far away their farms might be, for Steve had befriended some of them times they had been down on their luck. But she wouldn't want them to come to the burial. If she plucked up courage and watched them put Steve out of her sight, the fewer there the better she would be pleased. It had sounded easy, the

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way Steve had talked to her, times and again, about keeping a stiff upper lip, but try it and it was mighty hard, she was thinking. And this was only the beginning as far as she was concerned. She hardly knew where she was to begin from, excepting right here with news of Steve's death to break to the boys and the Duncans. Here was John Hedway, Duncan's foreman, riding towards her. She saw he was keeping his eyes on her as they rode slowly towards each other. Out on the Prairie they sensed somehow whenever anything was wrong with anyone else. Sometimes, smoke coming from a neighbour's chimney acted as a signal that things were right or the reverse. Their minds were trained, unknowingly, to the psychology of observation. They hardly needed telling if they were wanted in a hurry; they sensed a tragedy a long way off as an animal will danger. As John Hedway saw Hannah riding towards him leading Steve's horse, he looked at her, quizzically.

"Anything wrong?"

He spoke with a Southern drawl and screwed up his eyes as he looked at her as though he was very near-sighted. She nodded.

"Steve?"

She nodded again. Then in a whisper: "We started off together yesterday morning—he wanted

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to go into town : he'd been bothered with a pain in his side and he'd got business at the bank to see to. We only got twenty miles and he gave in. I got him under the pines and I sat beside him jest all the night through till he went out——” She spoke the last few words hurriedly.

John Hedway held out his hand to her. “ Gee, that's bad. For the love of Mick, come in to the Missus —you look all in.”

With his words of sympathy the tears came into her eyes. She bit her tongue—it wouldn't do to start giving way the moment anyone spoke to her. She rode along beside Hedway towards the farm. He had taken the bridle of Steve's horse away from her. One or two of the boys who had been in the corral came through the gate and watched the two of them riding slowly up to the door of the farm. Hannah riding with downcast head and Steve Sanderson's mare following dejectedly behind Hedway. Something was up. They stood motionless watching Hannah dismount and go up the few wooden steps to the door. As she turned the handle and started going in John Hedway beckoned to one of them, and leaving the horses in their charge, followed Hannah through the doorway. Mrs Duncan, in the kitchen, called out, thinking it was Duncan. John Hedway had his hand on

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Hannah's shoulder and brought her in to Mrs Duncan. He spoke for her. "Mrs Duncan," he said, "Steve Sanderson's died way up on the hill on his way into town—what do you know about that? Isn't it fierce? Hannah's been up alone there all the night—I reckon you'd better see after her. I'll go and find the Boss."

"Do," she said, "ask him to come right here. Come and sit down, you'll need something and don't you bother to say anything yet awhile; it'll be time enough when Duncan comes in. Sit down here and take off your stetson. What'll we hear next? That dog of ours was whining fit to beat the band all yesterday—I told Duncan we should hear something if he didn't stop. Howl—howl, all the day long without a stop. He always knows—that dog scents trouble, believe me."

She had removed Hannah's stetson off the table and hung it on a peg behind the door. The sound of Mrs Duncan's voice steadied Hannah and she began to talk quite calmly. "Did you have any idea that Steve was as bad as all that? Every now and again he'd looked mighty queer, and times I've thought that I've smelt some kind o' medicine about his room when I've made his bed in the mornings. There was a pain he complained of—that was why he was going in to the doctor. I

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reckon I've had twenty bats in the belfry not to know he was as bad as all that."

"How far had you gone?"

"Twenty miles. He hadn't been riding at all lately, now I come to think of it."

"Duncan will know anything there is to know. Steve told him pretty well all that concerned him, 'cause he knew Duncan as close as a coffin lid. He'll be here presently. You just sit there and I'll make you some tea and fry some bacon. For the Land's sake you must have been scared stiff sitting on that hill in the wood through the night—just imagine!"

She left Hannah sitting by the table and went into the kitchen. Hannah leant forward and rested her arm on the table. She was beginning to feel exhausted after the strain. Anyway, there was nothing but kindness around and she might have done worse than come to the Duncans. In a moment or two Duncan came in. He was much younger looking than Mrs Duncan. He came over to Hannah, at first not speaking to her. He laid his hand on her shoulder and she felt, instinctively, that he was upset at the news of Steve's death. He said, quietly: "We've got something in common with each other now, Hannah. Steve Sanderson was my best pal—had been for years. Can't think

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what it'll be like not seeing him around. Missus looking after you ? ” Hannah nodded. “ We'll stand by you, make no mistake about that, Hannah. You know I'm your friend, same as I was Steve's.” He put down his hand and held hers for a moment. She returned his hold and tightened her fingers round his. Again she wanted to cry but dug her teeth into the tip of her tongue. Duncan continued : “ We'll see to things. How far from the trail is he ? Think we shall find him ? ”

“ I'll come.”

“ Sure you will not ; you stay right here—the boys and I will find him. One of them will have to ride in to the doc ; we can't bury him without a doctor seeing him. 'Tisn't like the old days.”

“ It's just before the trail starts down the hill ; past twenty trees or so. I left him under the rug.”

“ What colour rug ? ”

“ One of the blankets off Steve's bed—you've seen them ? ”

“ Sure. Don't you worry.”

“ I reckon I'd rather come and keep on the move.”

“ That's all right now. The Missus wouldn't hear of it. You have some sort of a meal and then get on to the bed. I'll come and tell you when everything's fixed.”

The smell of the bacon frying in the kitchen and the

coffee being made came through to them. There was nothing lacking in the way of hospitality where the Duncans were concerned. They would be offering her a home, though she had an idea that, as long as Mrs Duncan knew she was being looked after elsewhere, she'd as soon have Duncan away from any women folks.

It was a relief to think that Duncan was on his way to Steve. She couldn't bear to think he was lying there alone under the pine trees, even though he mightn't know it himself. It would be her he'd be worrying over as he always had in the past. She hoped he knew that she was here being looked after by Mrs Duncan. She would have to appear as though she could well look after herself because she wanted to be her own mistress. She hadn't minded too much Steve bossing her and keeping her a bit tighter than other girls were kept. It seemed to give her superiority, and that was what Steve had intended, though that mightn't be an advantage now. Mrs Duncan was placing a plate of eggs and bacon, a jug of hot milk and a coffee pot in front of her. She was famous for her home-made bread and began to cut a golden crust off the loaf for Hannah. "Whatever happens," she was saying, "we've got to keep going jest all the time. You won't realise what's happened yet

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awhile—a shock’s a shock all right when it comes this way.” She bent over Hannah affectionately. “ You’ve only got to ask for anything you want.” Hannah looked up gratefully.

“ Sure, I know, Mrs Duncan. I reckon you and Mr Duncan are being real kind. There was no folks anywhere that Steve was crazy over but you and Mr Duncan. He knew the right people every time ; no one could kid him, could they, Mrs Duncan ? ”

The tears were on her lashes and she found it didn’t seem too bad having a quiet cry while she started to eat the bacon Mrs Duncan had placed in front of her. She believed she had known a few days before that something like this was going to happen, but she would not let herself believe it at the time. A queer sort of feeling had come over her when she had undressed the night before and called out good-night to Steve. He had been walking round to the log shed and as she had watched him pass her window his footsteps seemed to sound peculiarly clear and she had listened to them as they got fainter and fainter, as he went round to the back of the shack. Just as she was lifting the cup of coffee to her lips Mrs Duncan reappeared with a glass in her hand. “ Here,” she said, “ before you drink your coffee take a sip of this.”

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“I don’t see as I need whisky, Mrs Duncan, I’m feeling a heap better since I started to eat, though I didn’t know I was feeling like it.”

“You drink that—what you want now is a good sleep. I reckon Duncan won’t be back for a long while yet. Maybe they’ll take poor Steve into the town—unless he’s been seeing a doctor they’ll want to know what he died of, sure.”

“I never thought of that ; if he’d been seeing a doc, though, they’ll bury him right away and I reckon I’d have to be there.”

“Don’t think about that jest now : you finish what’s on your plate and then come and have a good rest.”

CHAPTER III

SHE slept through the hours when James Duncan and John Hedway were riding in search of Steve Sanderson's body. As soon as they found him James Duncan rode off at once into the town to fetch a doctor out. Dr Maynard was at the hospital, so riding there Duncan left a message asking him to phone him at the Athabasca Hotel where he would wait. On the way to the Athabasca he called at the Dominion Bank and asked to see the manager. Beasley knew that Duncan and Sanderson had been pretty good friends and that he should be the one to look after Steve's affairs under the circumstances. Beasley nodded to Duncan as he was shown into the small office which led out from the bank and held out his hand to him. "Pleased to see you, Duncan, sit right there." He nodded at the chair the other side of the desk. Duncan sat down, crossed his legs and placed his stetson on his knee.

"I've got pretty bad news for you. I reckon you liked Steve Sanderson as much as any of us—well, he's dead—died twenty miles from his shack on

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the way into town yesterday. Hannah McCleod rode into our place this morning, she'd been with him alone all night. I guessed something was pretty wrong with him this year past and he didn't deny it when I asked him once, though he wouldn't say what it was. I've just been around to Maynard ; soon's he's free I'll take him out. But I thought I'd come in and ask you. I was about as near a pal as he had, told me most things—how'll Hannah McCleod be off for funds ? ”

The manager was drumming with his fingers on his desk. He was thinking of Steve Sanderson and the news he had just been told.

“ That's bad,” he said, “ the best man we had hereabouts. Don't know what made him so. He was big—gotta mind like a child's and yet there was nothing he didn't know. But seeing and knowing the worst things in this country never made a dime's difference to that man : believe me, I'm as sorry as I know how. No one could make me believe after knowing Steve Sanderson that mixed blood is as bad as it's made out to be.”

“ He only spoke of that once and then it was to say he wasn't ashamed of his Blackfoot mother and that if he'd got any good in him it was as likely to come from her as the white man that had gone and left her.”

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The manager shifted his position and leant forward. He picked up the pencil and began making dents on the blotting pad. For a moment neither of the men spoke and then Beasley said : "What about this girl—Hannah McCleod, did he say anything about her ? Of course I know the tale that the parents were young folks fresh out and both of 'em taken mighty bad and dying. There was no one to take the child so Steve Sanderson wrapped her up in a blanket and fetched her home with him. No one belonging to McCleod wrote from the old country and they couldn't find a trace of his people : they were a cut above most of the folks that come out as emigrants but they brought a mighty little with them. Maybe, they'd run away together——"

Duncan said : "He didn't tell me much more. He's kept her pretty close but she has her head screwed on the right way, believe me. She's welcome to stay on with us—we'll see to that."

Beasley looked up at Duncan. "Well," he said, "I guess you'll have to talk that over with Mrs Duncan. Sanderson hasn't left the girl an heiress exactly. The shack was mortgaged—did he tell you that ? He had saved a bit at one time and he went and put the whole lot into those Goddam oil wells that were supposed to be sunk near Calgary

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a few years back. And the well he chose was a dud, would you believe it ! It was for that girl he risked it—wanted to send her east to a swell school. Yeh, the shack was mortgaged and he's got about fifty dollars in the bank right here and that's about all."

" Say, that's bad ; not that Hannah'd be on the look-out for any money of Steve's but she's not the sort that should be left without a dime in her pocket to see her through. Well, I must getta move on. I'm waiting at the Athabasca for a 'phone message from the doc."

He rose and held out his hand to Beasley. " If there should be any debts around let me know, will you ? I'll be in again in a day or two, you needn't bother to mail a letter, I'd sooner keep it quiet from the Missus if there is anything to pay up."

He went out and made his way round to the Athabasca Hotel. As soon as he entered the girl behind the counter held her hand up to him.

" 'Phone message, Mr Duncan, just come, right now." She held a slip of paper out to him. He took it from her.

" Right, I can't stay, I'm wanted in a hurry. How's yourself, Edie ? "

" Fine. How's yourself ? "

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"Hipped. Steve Sanderson's dead."

"You don't mean to say! Gee, I liked that man, there was nothing wrong with him, no, sir."

Duncan then rode to Dr Maynard's and was shown into the waiting-room. Immediately he got inside Dr Maynard opened the door and told him to come into the consulting-room. Duncan went in. Dr Maynard listened to the tale of Steve Sanderson dying on the hillside. "Sure," he said, "last year I gave him six months; he ought to have been in hospital two months ago. He must have been taking dope to have kept away all this time. Cancer doesn't let you off easy at the end."

"That was what the matter was—eh?"

Dr Maynard nodded. "Fine man, I'd have trusted him further than any man I know in Redcliff."

"Well," Duncan said, "it hasn't helped any he stuck things out on account of Hannah."

"That girl?"

"Ah-ah. She was like his own child."

"And wasn't, eh?"

"Sure, no——"

"Is that so? And where did he find her—in a gopher hole?"

"Parents died and Steve took her back with him. Say, doc, what had we better do?"

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“ Bury him there, I should say.”

“ That’s what I thought but I had to let you know.”

“ Sure, yes, you were right there. But there’s no need for me to see him. I reckon it was best for it to happen like that than have him lying in the hospital here for a couple of months ; that would have driven him crazy, though he’d have been under morphia all the time.”

“ Maybe, he’s been taking it off his own bat.”

“ Maybe.”

As soon as Hannah woke she called out to Mrs Duncan. She was conscious of having slept a long time and wondered immediately what had been done about Steve’s burial. She wanted to hear that it was all over, and yet she knew she would never forgive herself if she shirked being chief mourner. For she owed him so much. He had never spoken much to her of who she was or what he knew about her parents. “ They was both took off when the flue was bad and I fetched you back with me.” Since she had been old enough to know what some of the other men were like she wondered how Steve’s manliness could have been mixed so equally with his gentleness. A man did not win respect from other men, as he had

always done, because he happened to have a gentle nature or appreciation from the sort of women who lived on the Prairie on account of his manliness. The combination which was in his nature had won him the affection he held, of all sorts and conditions.

As soon as Mrs Duncan heard her call out she went in to Hannah and stood at the foot of the bed. It was the small spare room which the Duncans kept for any visitors who might come out and see them from the town. Her red hands, broadened with work on the farm, rested on the brass rail. She was a thin, spare woman, of medium height, a good deal shorter than Hannah. Her hair was straight, turning grey at the front, almost white at the temples, Hannah noticed, watching her stand there. She looked hollow-chested, as though her breasts had been scooped away. She wore old-fashioned shirtwaists as the women had twenty years before and serge skirts, always on the long side and covered with a dark blue print apron. Hannah knew that in a sort of a way Duncan was still attached to his wife and she to him, with a sort of savage jealousy, knowing that he found other women attractive. "And for why?" Hannah was thinking, "'cause she dresses and looks like his grandmother instead of his wife."

Duncan was a man whose looks improve with

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age. Before he had married he had not had half the opportunities he found now in which to make up to women he met, few though there were, unless he paid visits to the town. Mrs Duncan was speaking to her and Hannah kept her eyes fixed on her. "James," Mrs Duncan was telling her, "went in to the doctor—they found poor Steve all right. My! What a place to die, on the hillside, I jest can't forget it. It was cancer he had, poor man, and fancy none of us knowing it, not even Jamie that he knew so well. They'll bury him right there whenever you say. Jamie'll have a word with you presently. I reckon you had a good sleep and needed it too. You won't forget last night for a long while. I'll fetch you a jug of hot water and maybe you'd like a wash."

"That's so, Mrs Duncan, I feel's though it was a month since I had my hands in water. I'm glad the doc hasn't to come out. I reckon, I'll have to see it through, eh, Mrs Duncan, though it will be mighty hard to see them put Steve right away outer my sight, like they'll do."

"Sure, Hannah, it'll be mighty hard, I know that, but I'll come along as well; one of the boys will drive me to the foot of the hill in the democrat. Is it a long way up?"

"As far as the pines leave off, Mrs Duncan.

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But I reckon you've no need to come all that way. Steve would know you'd been willing."

"Steve Sanderson was as good a man as I've ever met—I'd go if I had to trapse fifty miles as far."

Hannah sat up and began to get off the bed. Her head reeled and she put up her hand and put it to her forehead. She had never had to face an ordeal before—had never had an experience as she had just passed through. She had never borne any responsibility, and here was James Duncan and the other men waiting for her to give the order to bury Steve on the hillside over which he had ridden for so many years. That was where he would have wished, anyway, to be buried. The sun would light on his grave as it rose flooding the valley and the Prairie beyond. The people who had been his friends could lift their gaze from the plains and guess pretty well whereabouts they had laid him. They would cut down a pine and the handiest among them would make a cross and put it at the head of his grave. She wondered whether he would have liked his Bible buried with him—it had meant so much to him. Or whether she would keep it, though it might bring the memory of him back too vividly. She could never forget him, but if she had to face life with the courage he had spoken of, the thought of him might make her wish

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too much that things hadn't happened in the way they had.

Mrs Duncan, seeing Hannah put her hand to her head, went over to her and put her arm round the girl's shoulder. She patted her affectionately. She was only a child after all, made to look more so by the way she wore her hair hanging down to her shoulder blades. Mrs Duncan reckoned Steve ought to have made her clip her hair same as other girls did; maybe she could induce Hannah to let her do it before she left them. She'd have to find work in a store or something of the sort. She'd offer her a home, she couldn't do otherwise, but she'd rather Hannah didn't accept. True, she might marry any of the boys that were living with them at the farm, but Hannah was, and looked, a cut above any of them, though Mrs Duncan couldn't tell why. Well, she'd marry, sure, if she went into the town. She wasn't actually pretty, but anyone would look at her. Her hands weren't roughened with work, though Mrs Duncan knew she worked as hard as any woman on the Prairie up at Steve's shack. She was noted for her cooking. The boys often talked of the dandy cakes she turned out. Steve had been proud of the way she had kept the shack, of her taste in setting things out, just as though she had been used to better things,

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and had said good-bye to them a while back.

Hannah sat up after a moment. When Mrs Duncan had put her arm round her she felt as though she might break down, but she stiffened herself and felt the best thing was to go through with the task of having Steve buried as soon as she could. She stood up and reached out for her breeches and shirtwaist. She buckled the leather belt round her waist and stepped over to the little table where there was a small looking-glass. She tidied her hair, took out a small green celluloid comb and combed her hair out. She guessed it had been the whisky as much as anything that had made her sleep so long and now given her a colour in her cheeks. When she had finished she put the comb away in her pocket and brushed the front of her skirt with her hand. Then she looked at Mrs Duncan. "I reckon I'd better talk to Mr Duncan now; it'll be dark before we get up the hill else. I guess it'll seem queer to everyone a girl being placed in this kinder way. It gives you a funny feeling not to belong to anybody, but maybe I'll get used to it in time."

"Sure, Hannah girl, you'll be marrying—it's the only thing for a girl to do."

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Hannah made no reply. She guessed Mrs Duncan liked to think of girls marrying so's they'd have husbands of their own instead of coming after hers. They both went into the parlour where James Duncan was sitting, smoking. He got up and pushed a chair forward for Hannah to sit in. Mrs Duncan stood by the table. Hannah wished she would go off somewhere and leave her to Duncan alone. She clasped her hands together and leant forward over the table. "Well, Mr Duncan, I hear you've seen to what ought to be done about Steve; I'm real grateful."

"That's nothing, Hannah: Steve and me were pals if ever there were any."

"I know that, Mr Duncan. What's there to do next?"

"If you feel like it Hannah, you can come with us or you can stay here, which I reckon would be best for you."

She shook her head. For a moment she could not speak.

Mrs Duncan came forward and once again put her hand on Hannah's shoulder. She said: "Hannah wants to see the last of Steve; I've said I'll come as well. I can come in the democrat that far to the foot of the hill."

Duncan looked across at her. "Sure," he said,

"I'll see it's got ready right away. Maybe, Hannah'll drive with you."

Hannah looked up quickly and shook her head. "I'll ride if you don't mind, Mr Duncan, I shan't feel so bad."

Duncan assented at once. He would ride beside her. She was accustomed to depend on men more than women. He supposed Steve had been afraid women would have wanted to butt in and have a hand in Hannah's upbringing, for he had never encouraged them to the shack or had Hannah visiting them more than he could help. Come to think of it the girl had known precious few women, but the few she had known always spoke in praise of her and wondered that men showed her the respect they did, seeing she'd had such a strange upbringing. Duncan was saying: "And you'll come back here and stay a bit: I reckon you can't go back to the shack."

He looked across at his wife and she understood from his look that she must agree. "Yes, Hannah," she said, "that's so, you can't go back there and sleep alone."

She thanked them both. "Maybe, for one night, but I shall get into Redcliff as soon as I can—I reckon I'll have things to see to there. Well, I'm ready whenever you are Mr Duncan."

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“Hannah’s right, we oughtn’t to be hanging around here longer than we need.”

Duncan stood up and went to the door. “The democrat will be round in ten minutes.”

Mrs Duncan still had her arm round Hannah. She said : “Come in with me to my room while I put on my things. Don’t you sit here by yourself thinking of what’s to be done. And I’ll put the kettle on the stove before we leave : I guess we sure will want something soon’s as we get home.”

“I’ll do that, Mrs Duncan, while you dress.”

She knew her way about the Duncan’s farm and went out at the back where they got their water. She filled the kettle and lit the oil stove. The little things that had to be done year in, year out. It wasn’t like living in the town where you could turn a tap and switch on the electricity. Out here, things had got to be done from the beginning just as the folks had done long ago, three or four hundred years, when they had first set foot in the country. True, now they had canned goods to help them out in the winter when everything was scarce, but that was about all. She took out the table cloth from the drawer and started laying the table. This was a queer thing to be doing—getting a meal ready so’s they could get a tuck-in as soon’s Steve was out of their sight—buried on the hillside in

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the blanket she had laid over him herself twenty-four hours before. Gee, it was hardly human, and she'd got to see it through. Sit at this table and eat with the rest of them, or else they'd think she was soft. She reckoned the food would choke her. The tears started to her eyes and she heard Steve saying to her as she had sat by his side the evening before as the sun had set: "Courage—courage is the thing——" She'd sure have to go on mixing into herself more than she was doing now. Here was Mrs Duncan coming out of her room pulling on her gloves for all the world as though she was going to some show in town. Hannah quickly brushed away the tears that had come into her eyes. She went and took her stetson from the peg at the back of the door.

"Shall we go outside, I reckon the democrat will be right there by now."

"Sure," said Hannah. She held the door open for Mrs Duncan to go through.

CHAPTER IV

OUTSIDE, Duncan stood beside his own horse and held Hannah's by the bridle. Hannah looked at each of the boys in appreciation, for they were all ready waiting there, each looking downcast and hardly raising their eyes to her as she came through the doorway with Mrs Duncan. They were good lads, she knew them well, for they had come to the shack whenever they felt inclined. There was Wolff, the German, who strummed on the ramshackle piano that Steve had once brought in from town : Fraser, the boy from Glasgow, whose face, Steve had once said, was all smile and freckles. Gil Smith, who squinted and who seldom spoke, but was always good-natured, and George Shaw, the Irish boy who had the temper of a fiend.

John Hedway helped Mrs Duncan into the democrat and got in beside her. It would take them a bit longer than the others to get to the foot of the hill, and the others would have to wait, anyhow, for the spade which they were taking in the back of the democrat. In less than half an

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hour the sun would be setting, but as long as they kept from the pines it wouldn't be too dark for them to see. The nights were wonderful on the Prairie. It could never be dark because of the wonderful starlight. It was at night that the distance was unnoticed and the feeling of aloneness lessened. The moon would be rising early. Hannah reckoned it would all be easier to bear than if it was broad daylight. The air, cooling, fanned her face and lessened the throbbing in her head. They were all cantering now, leisurely, a little ahead of the democrat.

Hannah rode ahead with Duncan, neither of them speaking, but he whistled a little under his breath. There was silence everywhere, only the thudding of the horses' hoofs could be heard as they cantered along, and the occasional creaking of the democrat behind them. Once or twice Hannah looked round and saw Mrs Duncan and John Hedway looking as though they were packed close together on a see-saw as the wheels bowled over the mounds and dipped into the ruts. Riding in company seemed to lessen the distance. It had seemed interminable when she had ridden to the Duncans alone that morning. They were coming close to where the hill started to ascend to the pine trees. When they got to the foot of the hill

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where the track began to narrow, the boys and Duncan dismounted. Gil Smith and Wolff gave their horses to Mrs Duncan and John Hedway and the two of them mounted the mare which had been driven in the democrat. Duncan took the spade which Hedway handed him and began to ride up the trail with Fraser and Shaw. Mrs Duncan and Hannah followed with John Hedway. The sun had set now. The orange and crimson spread each side of it for miles across the horizon. In the direction of the farm a blue haze hung. They rode up the hill in single file.

Hannah felt, every now and again, as though she was actually returning to Steve, and that she would hear him hull-oo as he often did when she rode out of sight. Would she really never see him standing—lolling against the doorpost of the shack, his shirt open at the front, smoking, looking out over the Prairie in the distance? Never again. In a few moments now they would come across him wrapt in the blanket. She supposed Duncan would read the prayers over him. Life had seemed so simple to Steve. He had never puzzled himself over the meaning of it; never found it hard to understand. She could hear him reading: "Who will bring me into the *strawng* City?" "What's the fun," he would say, "of telling lies and hittin' a

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feller when he's down and getting a woman to do wrawng --there ain't nothin' in it."

They were nearing the top of the hill now, and they could hear the spade as Duncan and the boys took it in turn to dig the grave. John Hedway led Hannah and Mrs Duncan a little way away and they stood looking down into the valley which was dark, the river hidden in the shadow. An extraordinary calm came to Hannah standing there looking over the valley. It did not seem so dreadful after all that Steve should have died and was to be buried on this hillside. There was something splendid and appropriate about it. He had belonged to the Prairie and in lying here, the Prairie would seem to belong to him. If she could believe in the things he had taught her with the same simplicity that he had had, surely life would not seem so hard to face. And whichever way you turned there were folks only too ready to do what they could for you.

They heard Duncan call them, and when they turned to him Hannah saw that he had a prayer book open in his hand. They had laid Steve already in the grave. They went nearer and stood in a group opposite Duncan. Hannah saw George Shaw the Irish boy standing at the back, take out a rosary from his pocket, kiss the crucifix and cross

himself. Gil Smith had his head tilted up and was squinting at the sky. Mrs Duncan's face looked pinched, and standing bent, her chest looked more hollow than ever. The breeze was fanning the pine trees and their scent hung almost like incense upon the air. Duncan's Scotch voice, reassuring them of the resurrection of the body made Hannah glance up at him. They all seemed entirely altered. For these few moments they were different people. They seemed to be waiting on a threshold as much as Steve himself. It didn't seem as though he had left them after all but as though they were following him, going a little way with him on his journey. She tried not to look down on the grey blanket in which he was wrapped, but fix her eyes on Duncan's face as he finished reading the prayers. Presently John Hedway was leading her and Mrs Duncan away from the grave, and Hannah saw one of the boys pick up the spade. John Hedway led the horses a little down the hill and mounted Mrs Duncan and Hannah. The moon was rising now behind them, the sky was brilliant with stars over their heads. Hannah looked up and the tears which she had kept back began to fall down her cheeks. Through the blur of them she guided her horse down the narrow trail, pine cones rolling to one side and nestling in the tufts of grass. A

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coyote was barking in the distance and one of the horses neighed, breaking the silence. They all rode in single file down the hill, more conscious of themselves than of each other. The passing of a man like Steve Sanderson brought their minds to a halt and they felt that life would seem queer at first without the familiar figure riding round the hillside with the girl he had cared for, riding beside him.

CHAPTER V

THE next morning she woke late with a sense of having travelled a distance away. It was strange not to see the familiar objects of her own room when she opened her eyes. After a moment the recollection of the night before came back vividly. It seemed a long time ago. Already she experienced an extraordinary sense of freedom. Steve's guardianship had ended. It was queer to think she was her own mistress. She could go where she pleased and with whom she liked ; provided there was anywhere to go and anyone to go with. She wondered what would happen to the shack. Once away from it, she realised that it was beginning to thrill her to think of seeing a little of the world beyond the horizon. She wondered whether she would travel on the railroad or whether she would have to stick in Redcliff for a bit. She might find it more difficult to find work than she imagined. A big store would scare her stiff. And yet it would be dandy to actually see the things that up to now she had only seen in the catalogues. She had sat for hours in the evenings at the end of her

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day's work, on the doorstep, looking through a catalogue sent to Steve from one of the big stores in Calgary. Furniture had a great fascination for her. Tables, that polished, would shine like glass, chairs with carved backs and fire-places so high that you'd have to stand on tip-toe to reach the mantelshelf. She shut her eyes and dreamed sometimes that she owned a place like you were shown on the pictures. She had only been a few times, and it had made the Prairie seem kindo' bleak for a day or two afterwards. Lying in the little bed in Mrs Duncan's spare room she felt as though someone was stretching her mind out as you might the top of a stocking that had shrunk with being washed too many times. Thoughts and ideas that she had never had before came into her mind. She thought of the shack half-way up the hill twenty miles to the left from the spot where they had buried Steve. It would fetch something. Anyone with a bit of money could make a nice place of it, sheltered as it was by the trees. In the winter that made a deal of difference. The ground was easily cultivated down the slope to the plain. Maybe one of the boys that were training as farmers with Duncan might buy it up, or one or two of them might share it. She would go back there as soon as she got up and collect the

things that she wanted. There would not be much. They would all go into one small grip which she could take along with her.

She was conscious of Mrs Duncan peeping round the door to see if she was awake. Hannah turned her head and smiled. "I'm feeling pretty good this morning, Mrs Duncan, you needn't worry over me. I reckon I've got to do a bit of thinking when I'm dressed. I'm real grateful to you and Mr Duncan for all you've done. I guess I've been a pretty lucky girl to have had a home with a man like Steve Sanderson. You never heard anything but good from Steve, didn't matter how long you was with him. He had the world going as God meant it to go, I reckon: I shall jest seem to have him near me somehow. Guess I'll never get the chance of doing a dirty trick—I should seem to hear Steve calling out at me if I did."

"You're welcome to stay here for a time, Hannah, as Jamie said last night. He's got to have a talk with you."

"Sure—and thank you, Mrs Duncan all the same, but I reckon I'd better get on into the town and see what's doing. I've heard some of the folks on the Parade pay five dollars a week to a girl if she can cook a bit. If Steve's left any money it had

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better stay in the bank, you never know when a bad time might come along.”

“ You’re facing things in the right way—doesn’t do to spend money ’cause you have it.”

“ No, sirree, that it doesn’t. Well, Mrs Duncan, I’ll get up now. Seems queer, somehow, to think there’s no good morning to say to Steve. I keep on thinking I’ll hear him call to me and tell me the day’s half over.”

“ You’ll miss him for sure—we all shall, he was a real good man and the only one that had a Bible round these parts. You don’t often see that now.” She brought a can of hot water to Hannah and told her as soon as she was dressed she would have her breakfast ready. Hannah realised she was hungry and dressed quickly. She looked at herself in the glass. She wished she did not look so young. She might have been fifteen and she was getting on for nineteen. The last two or three years had gone quickly, even in the winter, when she had to spend interminable days shut up in the shack on account of the snow. But the winters had never seemed to last long, and she found sufficient to do to fill in each hour of the day. By March, the sun always seemed warm enough to help them forget the severity of the frosts. She’d sure like to see herself rigged out in a decent hat and a coat that had a

bit of style to it, though she didn't do so badly cutting out frocks from MacCall's patterns. Her riding breeches did service for most occasions, but Steve had nearly always remarked when she had a thing on that suited her. He had always bought her something whenever they had gone into Red-cliff, though his money would never run to anything very much. Round these parts the men looked at you whatever you had on: she reckoned they would lose their senses altogether if they saw you all dressed up. She buttoned up her shirtwaist glancing into the little glass on the table. She wondered whether the experience of the last two nights had given her eyes that wide-open, wondering look.

She turned the clothes down off her bed and tossed the mattress half-way over. The breeze was blowing in at the window and the sun blazing over the Prairie. Then she went into the kitchen where Mrs Duncan was pouring the boiling water on to the coffee. The Duncan's place was well fitted up. It was grand to see a dresser such as they had brought out from Scotland with them, shining with blue Willow-patterned dishes of all sizes, set along in a row. Hannah wouldn't have minded staying on for a bit, as the Duncans had suggested, only she guessed Mrs Duncan, hospitable

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as she was, would sooner she shifted off to the town.

After breakfast Mrs Duncan told her that Duncan was in the parlour and wanted to have a talk with her before she thought of going up to the shack, which she advised her to do before it got too hot. Hannah went in and found Duncan sitting at the table with some papers in front of him. He looked up and smiled at Hannah. There was something about him that warmed her through. She flushed suddenly and dropped her eyes. He stood up and held out his hand. There was a chair beside his at the table, and he motioned to her to come and sit in it. She sat down, her hands in her lap. He asked her how she was.

"Fine," she answered, "I reckon, you and Mrs Duncan have seen me through this trouble—don't know what I would have done without the two of you."

"That's nothing." He spoke abruptly and placed his hand over hers. She flushed again. He never seemed forward or facetious in his manner towards her. To gain a woman's regard he made little advance. There was nothing surreptitious in his love-making; he quite straightforwardly claimed their affection. She was young enough to be his own daughter and because of that he

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was now trying to bring a care that was paternal in his attitude towards her. It was only his glance which foiled his attempt. He did not mean to look up at her like that when she had come into the room but her sudden appearance had taken him unawares. He quickly took his hand away from hers and began to take up one of the papers which were lying in front of him. He began : " Did you ever get the idea that Steve was putting by any savings in the bank ? "

" I never thought about anything to do with money. Steve never had a great deal—I guessed that 'cause there were times when I knew he would give me things that I coulda done with and he knew it. I only reckoned that maybe he was putting by 'case he ever needed it." She paused. " He used to talk once of sending me away to school down West and gee, didn't I get excited about it, then he dropped the idea and didn't say any more, and when I said something to him he kinder shut up and shook his head, as though the school idea was taboo."

Duncan said : " The shack was mortgaged—did you know that ? "

" Nope." She spoke abruptly as though she had suddenly become aware of Duncan trying to break something to her.

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“ Well, it was and he owes a bit in the town as well.”

“ Oh gee——”

He put out his hand and held hers for a minute. “ I’m telling you because you’ve got to know. If Steve had had a million you’d have had it. Steve never lived or cared for anyone like he did for you. He couldn’t have been prouder of his own girl.”

“ I know.” Hannah leant towards Duncan. “ Why ? ” she asked, “ do you know why ? ”

He shook his head. “ Have you thought of what you’ll do ? ”

“ There’s heaps I can do, don’t you worry.”

“ You can stay here.”

Her eyes met his. There was something good and lovable about him, she couldn’t help feeling it. She hoped if she stayed in Redcliff she would be seeing him now and again. If she was ever in trouble she wouldn’t mind going to him. Life might seem good if she could stay on a bit at the farm with him, and the rest of the boys, but she couldn’t stand having another woman around butting in and telling her how to go about things. She thought : “ I guess it ain’t natural to see a whole bunch of men around like you see here and jest one woman that ain’t so mighty good to look at. No wonder they look at me as though I was

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sure some beauty. I guess I'll have to take a back seat in the town."

"Now I'm left like I am," she said to Duncan, "I reckon I've gotta getta move on; 'twouldn't do to get stuck right here."

He said: "You ain't had much experience, Hannah. Things won't seem so mighty easy once you move away from here, though folks will all be good to you, there's no mistaking that: still, there's more than goodness you'll have to swallow as you go along."

"Sure, I know that."

He looked up at her as though there was more he would like to say to her but he knew she would only shake her head again and refuse to listen.

"I gotta learn sometime, that's a cinch."

He held out his hand to her. She laid hers in his.

"You know where to come," he said, "if you ever get hard hit."

"Sure." She felt the emotion which he was suppressing. He was sitting there philandering with words when he should have been telling her of her financial position. She shifted her eyes from his. "Well, I reckon I've not been left a million dollar baby, there's no fear of me getting kidnapped, no, sirree. Presently, I shall ride up

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to the shack and collect the things I want to take with me and then it's good-bye."

"I've told Beasley at the Dominion that if there's any debts left behind I'll see to them. I should feel then that I'd made some return to Steve for the friendship he'd given me. But if I do—I don't want anybody to know about it."

He lowered his voice and Hannah guessed that it would be Mrs Duncan he'd want to keep the information from, for everyone knew that she watched every dollar he made, or thought she did. Duncan went on: "If you go straight to the Athabasca when you get into town and tell Edie Brown you're looking for a job, I guess she'll put you on to something. Everybody tells Edie their wants."

"So I've heard."

"Seems you've heard a deal considering Steve kept you so close."

"Sure, the boys haven't been dumb times they've sat around, and some of the women know to stir the mud when it's got a bit thick."

"There ain't much they don't know."

"Sure, I know that and most of the bad, what's more."

They both heard Mrs Duncan moving around in the kitchen. Hannah asked Duncan: "What

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about the horses? Mine's mine all right: Steve gave him to me a long while back."

"You can sell the two of them to me and keep the money: that don't need to go towards any debts. Then if you ever want yours back again, you can have her."

"Sounds all right. I guess I'd like to ride Steve's to the shack and into the town when I go. Maybe I'd leave her at the Athabasca and you could send one of the boys in for her sometime."

"Sure. These papers are about the mortgage. Steve *had* put a good deal by, you know, and he went and bust it all in those oil wells near Calgary. Gee, I don't know how anyone could have been guyed like that. There were hundreds that went batty over that boom. Steve thought he'd get rich quick and send you down East—that's what put a stop to it."

He looked at Hannah who was gazing out over the Prairie through the window. She said: "I guess Steve taught me things that a swell school couldn't have and they won't get out of my head so quick."

Momentarily, Duncan felt jealous: "You got to be born like that, Hannah. 'Twouldn't be any good for me to read the Bible and fix my goings

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on a text because I thought it sounded good. Steve was just one of the lucky ones."

Mrs Duncan came into the room now and asked Hannah if she intended to take a rest for the day or return to the shack for some of her things.

"A rest's no good to me"—she knew Mrs Duncan thought that she'd been long enough with Duncan—"I'll get up right away and see what's to be done with everything. Has Mr Duncan told you——?"

"'Twas my place to tell you first, Hannah."

"Poor Steve died pretty broke, Mrs Duncan, and the best thing I can do is to get into Redcliff and get some kinder job before the winter sets in : we never know when it mayn't start in October : do you remember last year—blizzard in November, gee, will you ever forget it."

Mrs Duncan looked relieved. Not that she wouldn't have offered Hannah a home for good had she seemed to want to stay on, but it was pleasing to hear that she wanted to move on to the town of her own accord. It might be because she knew that there were men there with more money than the farmers on the Prairie and she'd be wise to get married before she found things too hard to stand up against.

"Well, Hannah, I reckon you know what's best

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to do and if Jamie and I can do anything for you, you've only got to ask us."

"You'll see me for sure," Hannah smiled at the two of them. "The town ain't very far away."

Duncan made a move and gathered up the papers off the table. He told Mrs Duncan that he would not be back for lunch and that she was to see that Smith had a cut on his hand disinfected and bound up when he came in or else he would be having trouble with it. He nodded to Hannah and Mrs Duncan and went out. Hannah would have liked to have followed him and have ridden round the farm beside him. She knew he was feeling bad over losing Steve and knew that he was wishing equally that she would stay on with them and yet, knowing that it might lead to complications if she did. That was why he had not persuaded her against her will. Hannah felt sorry for him, though she knew that there were few women as good as Mrs Duncan around those parts. "All the same," thought Hannah, "she ain't the kind to make a man feel that life's too good to last." She had got dried up with the life and work on the Prairie, tending too carefully to Duncan and the lads who were in their care. In a few years, she would know, all of a sudden, that she was worn out and an old woman before her time. What the Prairie gave

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to you in one way it took away in another. One thing was certain, it never gave back as much as you gave it, not if you were a woman. Mrs Duncan had had a good time of it compared to some. The boys were always willing to do anything for her and Duncan had not coarsened as most men were apt to, stuck on a ranch for fifteen years. There was a quality about him which Hannah had always appreciated. Mrs Duncan told her that she would lay the tea so that if Hannah returned when she might be down with the poultry, feeding them, she would find it ready.

It was seven miles on the flat from the Duncans to the foot of the hill, then about a mile and a half up a gradual slope before the hundred yards steep ascent to the clump of trees beside which the shack was built. It never seemed so far to ride having the hill in sight all the way ahead of you, instead of the vast distance, making you feel as though you were getting no nearer the place you were riding to. Hannah set off at a canter, for once she realised she was getting back home again she felt she wanted a good long time in the place which she would never see again, and where she had been happy for so many years. She was not one of those people whose memory travel a long way back.

Sometimes she had a faint recollection of a long ride and stopping at a ranch on the way. There was a room which occasionally came into her mind in which there was a large bed covered with a white quilt. She could not remember being taken into the room or out of it, the room itself was dimly in her memory and nothing else. Sounds sometimes, and tastes would make her stop and try to recollect something which she had forgotten, but try as she would, nothing clear would ever recur to her.

As she came in sight of the shack she felt she had been away from it a considerable time. The day before yesterday she and Steve had set out, Steve hardly speaking as he locked up and went round to the back of the shack where he hung the key in a crevice between two logs. Now she came to think of it, it would seem queer to have to unlock the door and go into the shack alone and see all the familiar things around. She had left some washing hanging up on the line in the kitchen, and there were some newly baked loaves in the bin, for Steve had said they might be back sooner than they thought. Perhaps that had been a blind, for he must have known that even in the hospital he would not live very long. The poplars were rustling and making it sound as though there was a shower of rain, which they so seldom had, and longed for

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all the summer through. How often Steve had stood in the doorway of the shack and looked first down the hill at the crops and then up at the sky, which held no hope that there'd be rain for a month of Sundays. After he had sunk that money in the bum oil wells, how he must have wanted to make good over the crops. She wished he had told her more of his troubles, spoken of his anxiety and confided his hopes in her. He had allowed her the run of the shack, leaving the housekeeping to her and her choice in furnishing or buying anything they were in need of, but otherwise he had treated her like a child.

The horse was mounting the incline, his ears pricked up, sensing their arrival home. Hannah patted his neck. "You should know what's happened as much as any, I reckon, but you're kinder bunged up with the shock same's me." Any other time she would hear Steve chopping wood at the back or singing away as he sawed some logs up. It seemed mighty quiet, and for a moment Hannah wished she had encouraged Duncan to ride with her just as far as this, even if he hadn't stayed.

She dismounted and went round to the back of the shack for the key. She wondered whether Steve had had any idea that he would never be

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coming back when he had hung it up there only two days before. She pushed the door open wide and stood on the threshold as if a little afraid to disturb the silence with her footsteps across the floor. But at last she moved forward and took a few steps to the table in the middle of the room. The curtains were drawn across the windows so that no dago farmers nosing around, could look in and see that no one was home. When the shack had first been built it had consisted of one large room, but Steve had partitioned off two bedrooms and made quite a tidy job of it. He slept outside with just a blanket over him, most of the year. She opened the door of her room quickly and then the door beside hers as though to ascertain she was alone in the shack. She reckoned she wouldn't want to stay so long, after all : it was making her feel queer, no sound inside or out, no soul near for miles, however she might want anybody. Now she looked at objects in the room. They already had the appearance, she thought, of having been left for good. Steve's chair pushed a little away from the table, looked empty. The room itself looked deserted, as though it had been uninhabited for months. There, on the shelf, was Steve's Bible and one or two other books he used to take down and read. She went into her bedroom and sat on

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the bed. The spring had broken one side and she sank in, her legs hanging down, her feet barely touching the floor. She covered her face with her hands. She wished she could have a good cry and then get on with the job of packing up her things and a few of Steve's, to put into the grip. But she could not realise that her life at the shack had come to an end and that to-morrow or a day or two afterwards she would be amongst strangers, dependent on them for everything she might want, though strangers could be as friendly as anybody. No need to be scared because she was going to meet a few townspeople. It was women she wasn't too keen about. If she thought that Steve wouldn't mind she would try and get a job like Edie Brown's in one of the hotels, but she reckoned that was no good unless you didn't mind what men you picked up with or rather that picked up with you. Still, it was no use to worry, something would turn up, and what she had to see to first was this business of packing up. First, she must get the grip out of the cupboard and set to work collecting what things could be thrown away and what kept. Her own clothes amounted to very little; she would leave anything of Steve's for Duncan to give away to any men he knew around, though, come to think of it, she expected they would have to be burnt as

he had died of cancer. If the furniture hadn't to be sold to pay any debts she would tell Duncan to take it back to their own place and keep it, which she reckoned Steve would like them to do. She reckoned that if she ever wanted it James D. would give it back to her. Or he might leave it in the shack if he was going to buy the place up for any of the boys, though they might treat it badly and it would be no good for anything then. She did not see how she could ever want it again, for she couldn't set up in a place of her own and she knew instinctively that when she married it would be to a man who would furnish their place in a different style to this. It was not for what a man could give her that she would marry him but for what he'd be himself and that was a good many pegs above the boys she'd met, hitherto, on the farms around. They were good lads; she liked them, but a man that thought nothing of spitting across the room was not for her. But what was she thinking of marrying for, though in the town girls of her age had thought of it for quite a while.

She found a cloth and well cleaned the grip. Then she went into Steve's room and started pulling out the things in the chest of drawers. His socks—which she had mended and washed for him as long as she could remember—collars,

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shirts. She'd tell Duncan he could shift the whole chest on to a waggon. She looked through each drawer and closed it again, seeing nothing that she would want in any way. In the sitting-room she went to the shelf and took the Bible down, wrapped it carefully up and placed it at the bottom of the grip. Then she took the grip into her own room and putting it on the bed she began to fill it up with her own things. When she had finished she fastened the grip and took it back into the sitting-room. It hadn't taken long: there was nothing to do now but to ride back to the Duncans and hang round till the following morning. She suddenly had a fancy to make some tea and have a last meal in the shack. But, maybe if she did, she'd start thinking too much of Steve and she must not allow herself to do that. She thought she heard a step outside, but the poplars rustling often made one listen for false sounds. But a moment later she was certain that someone had dismounted and was making their way to the door. She looked up and saw Duncan standing on the lowest step and pausing there as though he was waiting for her to tell him to enter. For a moment she was puzzled, wondering what had brought him in this direction. There were no farms beyond the shack; any that he might wish to visit were

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down on the plain. Before she had time to speak he had come up the one or two shallow steps and was standing a few yards away from her. He did not speak but stood looking at her. She was suddenly conscious of him having ridden purposely up there, knowing she would be there alone. But, after all, he had been solicitous all the way along from the moment he had heard about Steve—there was no reason why he should not wish to be a help to her in this last thing she had to do. She tapped the grip which was on the table. “It hasn’t taken long. Would you like to hear what I’d like done with the rest of the things? They’re no use to me, leastways, not at present.”

Duncan pulled the chair from the table and sat down. He said: “You don’t reckon you could somehow stay on? John Hedway might be willing to move his things up here, he might help you with the crops so’s you might make good next year.”

Hannah shook her head. “Nope,” she said, “what’s the good? I liked it well enough here with Steve but, gee, it ain’t the life you want for ever. Hurts a bit, I know, to say good-bye and all that, but I’m as likely to make good in a job—fact, I’d like to pay any debts.”

Duncan laughed. “You’ll have to find work first before you start counting up your dollars;

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wages aren't as high as they were a time back and if you're paid by the month it'll seem a long while before you've got something in your pocket. That's partly why I've come up here—I want to see what you'll want to start off with."

"I'll pay it back one day—are you sure there ain't nothing in the bank—seems kinder queer for Steve to be as low as all that."

"There's fifty dollars : you can go and fetch it if you like, but it comes to the same thing which pays what of the debts and what you have from me."

"I see."

He leant a little over the table. "Why don't you stay on with us ? I'd see that you got something for helping the Missus, only I wouldn't want her to know."

Hannah leant back in her chair. "Why ? " she asked, "I reckon you know me well enough to remember I don't hush about anything there's no harm in."

He rested his head in his hand as though he was tired. Without looking at her, he said : "You're right ; it's best for you to hit the trail, but there's nothing I wouldn't do to keep you here, you know that ? " He looked up at her as he finished speaking. "What's a man's life, Hannah, out on the Prairie

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after the first ten years. Fine, we all say that. You speak of ranching in the old country and gee, they think you're living in Heaven or pretty near it. And there's a lot of truth in it, I'll admit that, so's nothing happens to knock you over and make you wish that things were different to what they are."

"But I reckon you've gotta lot to be thankful for. A dandy ranch and Mrs Duncan is a real good woman."

"Sure, I know. I gotta lot, Hannah, but not the one thing on earth that counts and you know what that is. You mean a mighty lot to me—you know since when, don't you?"

She nodded.

"That evening," he went on, "that I was up here nine months ago: Steve had gone to sleep and you were sitting there darning one of his socks and you looked up——"

Hannah leant forward with her arms on the table. Duncan immediately took her hands in his. She tried to release his hold but he held her fast.

"Mr Duncan," she cried. "'Tisn't no use thinking of things like that—you know it's well as I do. I reckon as there are times when you git fed up and the life kinder drives you crazy after a bit. Up here, there's times I feel the same. Maybe,

that's why there's folks like Steve and Mrs Duncan sent to put a gag on us or where'd we be ? Maybe I haven't learnt yet what there is in life to go shoving us on to wishing for things we oughtn't to be craving for—I only know that there's something that drives you well nigh crazy if you happen to stand at the door and look out over the Prairie nights there's a moon." Duncan held her hands tighter and leant nearer her. " But 't isn't any use—you got to keep right on and do your job. You've kept an eye on your cattle and the boys that are in your charge and I've kept on baking the bread and doing the chores." Duncan kept his eyes on her and yet he could hardly bear to see her giving way suddenly like this to her grief. The tears were falling down her cheeks. " There's something somewhere that makes it all worth while—I couldn't live with a man like Steve and think anything else. When he was reading out of his Bible, sometimes it seemed as though he was reaching out for something that he hadn't found, something that's too far away for any of us to find. I reckon he had a fierce time when he went in and blew that money in those bum oil wells, but he didn't let on. And you know the year before last when the crops were like rotting manure, he didn't say much, but gee, what that man must have felt like. Do you know

what I keep hearing him read over and over—
—‘ Who will lead me into the strawng City ’—and
when he read that it seemed as though he didn’t
seem certain of himself, as though he wanted
someone to give him a leg on.”

The tears were dropping down her cheeks on
the back of his hand. He got up from his chair
and went round and knelt down beside her. He
put his arms round her and held her close. She
held his head against her and tried to check her
sobs. It was good to break down and have the
feeling of someone holding you in their arms. She
could not remember anyone having done it before.
Steve had patted her shoulder or the top of her
head and sometimes he had rubbed her hands
when they got frozen in winter, but he had never
given her a caress and she was experiencing for
the first time in her life what it was to be held and
comforted. Nights she had often laid in bed with
her head buried in the pillow wanting to cry, though
she had had nothing, really, to cry for. The
emotion she was giving vent to now sitting there
with Duncan’s arms round her and with his head
pressed against her seemed to help her through a
kind of thicket. It was as though, with the shock
of Steve’s death, she had lost her way in an un-
definable darkness and this outburst of emotion

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had pulled her out for good and all. Duncan was speaking no longer, only kneeling beside her and allowing her to stroke his head. If, a moment before he had seemed to protect her, now she seemed to be protecting him and her protection helped to check the passion which had been surging in him.

Presently she said : " I reckon I'd better finish having a look around. We mustn't stay like this too long—we gotta make up our minds what to do with this stuff of Steve's and then getta move on." He looked up at her.

" Hannah ? "

" Yes, Mr Duncan."

" Could you kiss me ? "

" I reckon it wouldn't do any good."

" Couldn't do any harm."

" If I get fixed up in town—maybe we'll be meeting."

" Course we shall."

" We'll meet the same pals as we've always been, Mr Duncan, and we couldn't if you were to kiss me."

" I don't see why not. "

She suddenly drew his head against her and laid her head on his. She began to speak tremblingly : " I guess you've helped me through this bit of a time. If I've got to leave the shack it won't come

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so hard leaving it with you. Maybe there'll be times when I shall wish myself back."

"You've only got to let me know: I shall buy it over and get two of the boys to shift here and any time you want to come back you can walk right in."

"You're a good pal." She loosened her arm round his head and as he looked up at her, she kissed him.

It took longer than they thought, going through the things and putting what had to be burnt on one side. The afternoon began to slip away. Hannah said that she was going to make some tea and get something to eat. There was some canned stuff and the bread she had made before she and Steve had gone off. By the time they had done all that was needed they were conscious of the time passing and the shack's shadow lengthening at the back. Through the doorway they could see the breeze fanning the crops where they started to grow down the hillside.

Hannah turned to him: "Reckon we ought to be going." She opened the door of her own room once again. "I've taken everything I want: Duncan saw she was trembling. She had gone white and was speaking in a whisper: "If you find anything you'd reckon I'd like——"

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"Sure, I'd bring it in to you." He put his hand in his pocket and brought out a packet of notes. He held them out to her.

"For Mercy's sake," she said, "how much are you giving me?"

"A hundred dollars. I'm not giving you any. There's the fifty in the bank, the horses and the odds and ends."

"But what about the debts?"

"There mayn't be many; if there are—that's my show. I reckon you'll want clothes as soon as you start getting a job; a hundred dollars won't go far."

She looked down at the packet in her hand and then pushed them into the pocket of her breeches. Duncan continued: "And if you're ever broke hand a letter to Edie Brown and she'll see that I get it."

"I reckon, seeing the way you feel about me there wouldn't be much sense in you doing that: if you go on looking that way at me Mrs Duncan will get all fussed up. Maybe it would be better if I didn't come back to the farm."

She had not realised before this, his feeling for her. His face was drawn. She laid her hand on his arm. "But there wouldn't be such a mighty lot of sense in that. Mrs Duncan would think that there was

something queer in me quitting without a word of good-bye or thanks for all she's done for me. We'll ride back together and I shall be starting early in the morning."

"We'll say good-bye then——"

"What's the sense of that? We'll be meeting in town, for sure." She was beginning to tremble again: she wished they could move outside and get away from the shack which was beginning to tug at her emotions. She was glancing round the room—at all the familiar things in it. The biscuit tins in the corner where she had kept the bread and the cakes. The stove which she had filled with logs cut from the pine trees at the back. The cushions in the chairs which she had covered with a rose cretonne bought during a visit to the town with Steve. The floor which she had scrubbed until the boards were white between the cheap rugs spread here and there. The coyote skins nailed to the log walls. The rocking-chair Steve had given to her one Christmas. She'd tell Mrs Duncan she could have it to keep for her: she wouldn't want that to be given away. It all seemed to be closing down on her; in spite of having Duncan there, what a leave-taking it really was. She had shown no courage in the way she had been facing the future; it seemed to her suddenly,

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merely callousness. She hadn't realised how much she was leaving behind. There was nothing to do but to get out of the shack as quickly as she could, else she would want to be staying on after all, and what would be the use of that, especially as Duncan had let her know how he felt towards her.

She picked up the coat which she had laid on the bed. Her stetson was beside it. She wouldn't be wearing that much longer. She came out of the room and let the door swing after her. Duncan took her coat from her and began to help her on with it. She slipped her arms into the arm-holes and began to buckle the belt. She could hardly tell why she was suddenly hurrying so. She felt unless she got out of the shack something would crash down and prevent her from making her escape. The shack was holding her fast now, the memories it held, combined with the new-found emotion of being held in Duncan's arms, was breaking her fortitude. "For the Land's sake," she was thinking, "what's coming next?" Then to Duncan: "I reckon the life here that you and me've kicked against sometimes ain't so bad after all." She smiled up at him. "You jest remember that, Mr Duncan, when you lose a thing you want to get it back again, that's a cinch."

"You're the only thing I want and I'm losing you."

"We'd better quit, the way you're feeling's no good to anybody."

She straightened the brim of her stetson and started to lift the grip off the table. Duncan put out his hand and covered hers. He pulled her round to him roughly and held her close to him. She cried: "Let me go, Mr Duncan, I reckon I've got enough to get on with, without you making it harder. If Steve was here you wouldn't be giving way to your feelings—'t isn't fair."

He let go of her and took the grip out of her hand. He went towards the door. She followed him: they went through together. He pulled the door after them and locked it. He held the key in the palm of his hand out to Hannah.

"Whose?"

"Yours," she said.

He slipped the key into his pocket. He had tethered his horse to the post at the door of the shack. He went to untie it. By the time he had done so he saw that Hannah had mounted her mare and had begun to go down the hill. The plain below stood out clearly in the evening light. Each farm was discernible, the smoke rising from the chimneys. They would have to ride in single

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file down the hill for the mile and a half. Hannah rode ahead never looking behind her or speaking to Duncan. She felt sorry for him. She was sorry to be leaving him. She wondered what sort of a life lay ahead of her. Some instinct told her she would never return to this part of the world again. When they reached the foot of the hill Duncan rode beside her. They started off at a canter. Once Duncan asked her if she was sure she had the dollar notes safe he had given her. She felt in her pockets and smiled back at him. He told her to hold tight on to them when she was in the Hotel and to take them with her wherever she went. Once she suddenly reined in her mare and turning round looked back in the direction of the shack. The trees round it were visible still, but already it seemed far away. She swerved round and started off at a gallop, getting closer to Duncan. The atmosphere had become close since they had come down from the hill and Duncan looked overhead and away to the west. He said : "Feels as though there might be rain sometime if it's not too much to hope. This haze means something."

"Looks like dust—that doesn't mean rain. The air in the town won't seem too good after this."

"You're choosing it."

"It's for the best."

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“For you ? ”

“Ah-ah.”

“Maybe I’ll sell the place and fix up some sort of a job in the town.”

“That’d be a fine thing for Mrs Duncan ; I reckon she wouldn’t shed any tears over saying good-bye to the Prairie.”

“You think not ? ”

“Sure of it.”

Now the farm was in sight. In a short time he would have her no longer to himself. Goodness knows whether he would ever see her again. He would have to go on with his life without her. Seeing her occasionally in the town would only tantalize him, and he would be wondering all the time what other men she would be meeting and whether she was capable of looking after herself. She would never appeal to another woman if she was in trouble ; she had always depended on men ; she was capable of holding their affections and their regard. He believed if he ever heard of a man doing her harm he would see red. He said to Hannah : “I reckon I’ll be jealous if I ever hear of another man making up to you. That’s one of the things that isn’t going to make this life any sweeter than it is—thinking of you in town making pals of any Goddam swine that you’re likely to meet.”

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Hannah laughed at him. "It's all right : I can look after myself ; don't you worry."

For the next few minutes they rode in silence. Duncan was looking in the distance as if thinking hard. Hannah's emotions had quietened down and she, too, kept her eyes on the horizon, occasionally letting them drop to the farm to which they were getting closer.

Suddenly Duncan turned in his saddle.

"Look at me," he said.

Hannah looked him full in the eyes. In spite of what one heard of him he was a decent man, she thought, and she liked him. He could have taken a deal of advantage of her up there at the shack, seeing that there had been no one about and her depression of leaving the shack working on his pity for her. Maybe she would get fond of him if she saw much of him and so it was as well she was going away. For she had in her mind the vision of someone to whom one day she would give her heart and she'd no mind to squander her affections beforehand. But men were good pals if you knew how to manage them. She didn't believe all that the women around had told her. Keeping her eyes on his she said : "Leaving the shack wasn't such a stiff job having you around to help with things. I reckon there was more to see to but I jest couldn't stay."

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"I'm not thinking of the shack," he said, "I'm thinking of you. I've half a mind to ride in with you to-morrow morning."

"It's no good: if you came in maybe you'd want to stay a bit. Mrs Duncan wouldn't like it; you can't help knowing that she's crazed on you and 't isn't fair to get her all fussed up. Anyway, what's the good? I like you, Mr Duncan, you and me have always been good friends, seeing you were up at the shack so much to see Steve. I'm real sorry you've lost him; you'll miss him as much as I shall, I don't mind betting that."

"I'm not talking of Steve." He looked quickly ahead of him to see how near the farm they had ridden. They could be seen by anyone whether they were in the corral or in the farm itself. He did not dare touch her hand which was hanging down beside her as the mare paced along. He hardly knew what he wanted her to say to him. There was no avowal to make, unless it was that of ordinary friendship. What good would it do him to know that she liked him the better for the trouble they had been through together? He did not know what he could allow himself to hope for. But before they reached the farm he wanted her to say something to assure him that though they were parting there was some tie which would not

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be severed. It was not enough that she included him with his wife in her gratitude to the two of them. "Could I count," he said desperately, "in any way that would make me feel I was certain of you, however many fellows you met—there'll always be men around you and not for what you'll give them, but jest because they won't be able to do without you. You don't know the way they feel about you—you won't know till some fellow wakes you up. I'd like to think that you put me first as a pal even if there's fifty miles between us."

"Well," she said, "you've had your arms around me and that's more'n any fellow's done yet and I reckon the way you did it will kinder keep us together. I won't forget, no, sir. I know the difference between you and some of the others."

He rode ahead to open the gate and they both went through. She dismounted at the door and Duncan led her horse away to the corral. As she went up the shallow steps to the parlour door she felt suddenly exhausted. She went straight in to Mrs Duncan, who was getting the supper ready for them all. She did not turn to Hannah at first and Hannah thought she must have guessed Duncan had been with her and resented it. Hannah said: "Mr Duncan's been up at the shack helping me with Steve's things. It's a mighty poor job thinking

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he won't need them any more. I've taken all I wanted and Mr Duncan's going to see to the rest. There's only one thing, that's the rocking-chair Steve gave me a Christmas or two ago—I'd like you to have it, Mrs Duncan. Maybe if I ever get a home of my own you'd let me have it back but I'd like you to have it."

Mrs Duncan left the stove and faced Hannah. "Sure," she said, "I'll have it fetched down. I feel real sorry for you Hannah McCleod, and if there's anything we can do for you, you know where to find us."

Hannah said: "You've done a heap for me already."

The boys who worked on the farm, though tired after a hard day's work were only too willing to talk and start an argument with Mrs Duncan. Hannah sat silent, only occasionally raising her eyes and speaking to Mrs Duncan or the German boy whom she preferred to any of the others. Now and again she found Duncan glancing in her direction from where he sat at the head of the table. As soon as supper was over Hannah said if Mrs Duncan didn't mind, she'd get off to bed as she felt all in and she'd have to be up early in the morning. Mrs Duncan asked her: "Where do you reckon you'll go to?"

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“The Athabasca—they know me there and it won’t be for long, there’s certain sure to be some work going somewhere: I can turn my hand to anything.” She nodded to the boys who were standing in a group by the door ready to get out as soon as Hannah said good-night to them. She looked at Duncan and smiled. She wasn’t going to hold her hand out to him. Anyway, she’d be seeing him in the morning. “Good-night, Mr Duncan.”

Mrs Duncan followed her into the little room and told her she’d bring her a cup of tea in the morning before she got up, as she intended being early herself. She said: “It’s a long ride for you to take alone, Hannah, but, maybe one of the boys’ll ride a bit of the way with you.”

“Thirty miles ain’t much: I shan’t hurry. Seems queer to be leaving the Prairie. I feel I don’t want to leave you all in a kinder way, but it’s the only thing for me to do, I reckon.”

“The Prairie’s lonesome enough with neighbours round, but with your shack empty I guess it’ll feel queer.”

“Maybe you’ll get other neighbours, Mrs Duncan. If you ever want me to do anything for you in Redcliff, you’ve only got to say. I’ll let you know how I get on.”

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She was turning down her bed. Mrs Duncan said :

“I reckon you’re pretty neat, Hannah.” She had noticed the deftness with which Hannah had turned the sheet down. “A chambermaid in one of the hotels wouldn’t be a bad job : you’d get the tips and five dollars a week. I knew a girl that came out from Ireland and she put three hundred dollars away in the first few years she was out. She invested it when the land boom was on and held out for five days till the Lot went up to twenty-three thousand. The Agent made her hold out for another day and would you believe me, the boom finished. I bet he’d sold out a day or two before that. The Irish aren’t business folk.”

Hannah was looking over Mrs Duncan’s shoulder at Duncan who was standing in the middle of the parlour filling his pipe and every now and again trying to catch Hannah’s eye. He looked dejected and lonely, and Hannah’s own loneliness suddenly bore down on her and she wished Mrs Duncan would leave her. She wished she and Duncan could be together as they had been at the shack. She wanted the feel of his arms around her. He was human and kind and he loved her. Steve had loved her and perhaps the ache in her heart was for him as much as for Duncan. Her tears

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came near the surface and her heart throbbed. She reckoned if Mrs Duncan knew how she felt at that moment she would jest fetch around her mare and tell her she could ride in any direction she chose as long as she left the farm and Duncan to herself. She felt sorry seeing her stand there. She looked almost an old woman, not on account of her wrinkles or faded eyes, but because of something that had withered her besides her work. What a pity women like her could not learn to give a love to their husbands apart from the love they gave to them as young women. Men needed it. It was worth more than the passion which had been so long spent. It was the intangible which counted every time. The thing that could not be defined in actions or in words. That was what had seemed to count so much with Steve. He had said once: "A man will work for money, but darned if he will for some things that's better. You don't know where a good turn goes to, but it waits for you somewhere to shake you by the hand, believe me." He had never talked sanctimoniously of going to Heaven when he died but he thought of a place where he would arrive and find the good that he had done, put by, like savings in a bank, awaiting him with interest. With a little more understanding Duncan could have given something

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to his wife that was worth more than anything he had given to her as a young man. Out on the Prairie it was so essential. Companionship and compatibility, but either was so seldom found any more than it was found in the city. Something worth so much and yet never sought for, an ideal swept into a corner with the first quarrel or suspicion. Gee, women were fools even though the men might be something worse at times. Give her a man every time. She put her hand to her throat, for the throbbing seemed almost to choke her. She closed her eyes and seemed to see Duncan still standing in front of her, filling his pipe. She believed she was going to cry. She moved over to the bed and sat down on the edge. She tried to smile up at Mrs Duncan.

“ Won’t be long before I’m asleep, I’m jest all in, Mrs Duncan.”

Mrs Duncan put the candlestick down on the table beside the bed. She looked at Hannah sitting there, her head tilted back, her fair hair hanging on to her shoulders. She looked worn and tired out, for the last three days she had suffered more than she could have told them. Mrs Duncan took a step forward and resting her hand on Hannah’s shoulder, she stooped and kissed her. The door closed. No sound came from the parlour. If Duncan was still

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there he said nothing to his wife as she went through the parlour. A door shut somewhere ; Hannah thought it sounded like the Duncans' bedroom door. She heard the clock ticking in the parlour. It was an old clock which the Duncans had brought with them from Scotland and struck with a slow chime. It was bringing the night too quickly. She had that long ride to take alone, and then to start living with people whom she had never heard of in her life before. She wished Duncan would come in to her now and console her. She wished he would open the door and walk right in and hold her in his arms. She did not love him as he loved her—he was nearly thirty years older than she was, but she didn't mind if it was a million—he was human and kind. Her throat would burst in another moment. She began to take off her clothes rapidly as though her life depended on it. The button of her shirtwaist caught in the slide in her hair. She fumbled with it for a moment, releasing it at last, a few hairs attached to the button. She flung her breeches on to the chair by the bed. It was fierce to have something within your grasp a yard or two away and know you mustn't stretch out your hand for it. Something that would make all the difference in the world if you had it. Jest a bit of comfort when you were feeling that your heart was breaking.

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All that had happened in the last few days flashed across her mind like big cutting strokes from a long-lashed whip. The last ride with Steve—his giving in because he could go no further. His lying on the ground under the black pine-trees and slipping from her hour by hour, her hands on his. The ride to the Duncans and Steve's burial. The ride back and her return to the shack. She was in bed now and pulling the clothes over her head. Still silence everywhere, only the sound of one of the boys whistling somewhere in the distance. And then a long drawn sob and a sudden shivering. She turned over on her side and buried her face in the pillow.

There was no one—no one, no one.

Only Duncan, who maybe was still standing in the parlour filling his pipe.

CHAPTER VI

SHE slept till Mrs Duncan called her the following morning. The air was close, unlike the usual freshness of the Prairie. There was no breeze blowing in at the window and Mrs Duncan remarked that Duncan was sure they were going to get rain. She told Hannah that he was going to advise her to ride, if she could get as far before mid-day, to McClelland's shack and have a rest there before she finished her trek into the town. McClelland would give her a meal. Duncan was to ride five miles with her—he had told Mrs Duncan that much this morning. The boys would go for a mile to give her a send off.

“ You'll feel the heat,” said Mrs Duncan, “ but there, you can go slow.”

“ That horse of Steve's is an easy rider—I'll survive.”

She felt better for the night's rest : more hopeful. She heard Duncan's quick step outside as he shouted orders to one of the boys down in the corral. One or two of them were still having breakfast when Hannah appeared. She sat down beside Smith,

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and Fraser handed her the bread platter. The knife fell off and one of the others gave him a shove for his carelessness. They soon finished and John Hedway came in and sat at the end of the table. And lastly, Duncan. Mrs Duncan did not make any appearance, so Hannah got up and began to pour out the coffee for the two men. She passed John Hedway his cup, but Duncan had walked round to her and stood beside her as she finished pouring the coffee into his cup.

He said quietly : " Sleep well ? "

She nodded. " Sure, I had a dandy night."

John Hedway said : " You'll have a hot ride."

" Better than a cold one." She was conscious of Duncan standing beside her and wished he would move away before Mrs Duncan came in. He was obviously standing there so as to be as near her as possible. He took his cup from her—his hand was shaking and they both looked at each other. They were conscious of John Hedway looking down at his plate as though he had no wish to pay any attention to the two of them. It was a pity, he thought, that Duncan was showing so obviously his minding Hannah's departure. Mrs Duncan would sure make a fuss next time he said he wanted to get into the town alone, unless she heard that Hannah had moved further away from Redcliff.

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He hoped it was Steve's sudden death that had cast this gloom over Duncan and not so much because this girl was leaving this part of the world. The few days' trouble had made her look a little less youthful than she usually looked. Dressed in an ordinary way with her hair a bit shorter, she would look different. There was an air about her that made her appear like a city girl dressed up to take a part on the movies. He began to tell her the names of one or two people he knew in the town that she could call on if she had a mind to—they would do anything to help her if she didn't find work right away. He was advising her to get down East if she could—there'd be more choice down there. He thought he saw Duncan looking at him as though he would like to tell him to stop making such fool suggestions. He couldn't let her go as far as that: he believed he would follow her if he ever heard she had gone far away. Desperation could make you feel as though you wouldn't stop at anything. He was feeling at the present moment as though he would like to finish with the Prairie for good and all.

Hedway was finishing his last mouthful and beginning to push away his chair from the table. He came up to Hannah and held out his hand. "You've got good times in front of you, Hannah,

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for certain. I'm wishing you the best of luck. You're not going far away and you've got as good friends here at this farm as you'd find anywhere, isn't that so, Duncan ? "

" Sure she has, she knows that. We'll be seeing her again."

" 'Course you will : if I get fed up I shall know where to run away to, shan't I, Mr Duncan ? " She felt she wanted him to cheer up and make it less obvious to everyone how he was feeling.

She waved to Hedway as he went out of the room and was glad that Mrs Duncan made her appearance so that she would not be left with Duncan. She would be ready to start soon. She'd sit for a while and smoke a cigarette if Mrs Duncan didn't mind. There was not a breath of air coming in through the door. Already her breeches seemed to cling to her legs with the heat. The sooner she set off the better. She asked Duncan when he would like to start, as she was ready whenever he was. She said : " Mrs Duncan says you're coming a bit of the way and the boys as well."

" Sure," he said, " they wouldn't let you go without giving you a send off. I shan't be long, and then I'll give them a call to bring the horses round. Have you filled up your flask ? "

Hannah got up from her chair. " I'd forgotten,"

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she said, "and I guess I'll get parched with this heat. What do you reckon it's stoking up for? There'll be fires round if I'm not mistaken."

She fetched her flask from her grip and took it into the kitchen. Duncan finished his breakfast and went outside to find the boys. Mrs Duncan came in screwing up the top of the flask and gave it to Hannah. She held out her hand to Mrs Duncan. Mrs Duncan took it in both hers and held it. "Good-bye, Hannah, you take care now, look around before you settle yourself in with anyone, though they're a pretty good bunch in Redcliff, you'll find that out."

"I've always heard that—I shall be as right as anything, don't you worry." Mrs Duncan kissed her. They both went outside and saw Duncan there with the horses and the boys waiting round. She mounted and blew a kiss to Mrs Duncan. "This is some send off," she called out. Duncan mounted and they cantered away. Hannah looked round and waved again to Mrs Duncan who was standing on the step still looking after them. At the end of the first mile Duncan pulled in his horse and the others came to a halt. He didn't want them to come any further though he intended going on himself, and further than the five miles he had said he was going to ride with her.

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Each of the boys came and shook Hannah's hand, warmly. Woolff looked into her eyes and gave her hand a squeeze. She smiled at him and said: "See you all some day." She and Duncan turned and as they cantered off they heard the boys give a "whoopie." There was a bend in the trail a little further on and then they were out of sight. Duncan drew close to Hannah's side. He could not tell her to go slow for she must get through the first part of the journey well before midday. Even then, if this heat continued, she would be pretty done in. They weren't well off for farms between them and Redcliff as some others were. Thirty miles wasn't too bad going, but in this heat it was a bit stiff. Still, she was a good rider and knew the trail. Funny, this mist being on the horizon. He was tempted now to pull in and walk a bit. She took it for a signal that he was going to say good-bye and pulled in her horse. He shook his head and held out his hand to her. "I'm not going back yet."

"I ought to be getting on and it ain't any use you getting your horse all fagged out for nothing."

"He wouldn't be."

"Seems no good to talk sense to you."

"You don't know how I feel."

"Seems to me—the longer I take to learn, the

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better for me. Gee, ain't this heat awful." She was trying to pull him back with her hand which he held in his. She wanted to get the good-bye over, and get on without the emotion he roused in her to tire her out as well as the ride. Every time she thought of arriving in the town, homeless, and very little to look forward to, she felt tempted to cling to Duncan or take him along with her. And she knew very well that Mrs Duncan would be timing him and on the look-out for him until he came in sight. Somehow, this heat made her feel queerer than she might otherwise have done. Duncan's mouth was set and he was crushing her fingers against his palm.

"Come on," she said, in a whisper, "let's say good-bye: 'twon't be for long, you'll be coming into town and we'll have a bit of a time together, I promise you that. There ain't any use in both of us feeling bad this way." She made him stop and he looked hard at her. "You think of Steve," she said, "and maybe that will help." She could not bear to see him looking so miserable. She forgot her own loneliness and gave him a little smile. He bent over her. He did not speak but put his arm round her. He kissed her and she made no resistance. But then, suddenly, she pushed him away and said, queerly; "Good-bye." She

dug her heel into her horse's side and began to move away.

He said "good-bye" as quietly and allowed her to go, watching her as she turned round to urge the horse into a canter. He could not think for the life of him why he stayed there, not attempting to follow her. "Good-bye." He heard her whispering it again. He would always hear that whisper as long as he lived. She had ridden a little distance away now. Every now and again she turned and waved her hand and he waved back to her. He wondered whether Steve could possibly know they were parting like this. Steve would have had something to say to him if he had known he had spoken to Hannah in the way he had these last few days. He seemed to want to say "sorry" under his breath. Anyway, he was fixed here to the earth all right, watching her ride away when he could very well have ridden after her. He could have suggested a hundred and one things to her and had not. It was just her presence he needed—to know that she was somewhere around all the time. She was out of sight now and he was alone.

He turned his horse's head and began to wend his way back. Slowly at first, then breaking into a canter. It was a short way back, or so it seemed, but that might have been because he was in no

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hurry to get back. What on earth was he going to do when he got there? His interest seemed suddenly to have gone in the farm and the lads he was training to take their place on the Prairie when a few of the older ones gave up. The heat was intense. How, for the love of Mick, was Hannah going to stand it for another twenty-five miles with only one rest on the way? He closed his eyes. The sweat was pouring down his face. He seemed to see Hannah cantering away from him, her stetson pulled down over her eyes, the grip fastened to the saddle at the back. As he got off his horse and led it into the corral he felt old and as though he had no further interest in life.

As Hannah cantered along, every now and again little fitful gusts of hot wind blew up and died down again. Each time they came they dried her lips and throat and she was forced to drink some of the water out of her flask sooner than she should have done. She could never remember the air being so dry, even during any of the droughts they had had in recent years. The mosquitoes settled on her neck and hands. The ground had become uneven and her horse was first cantering up a low hill and then down on the other side. Then it would be flat for a couple of hundred yards until the ground would rise again. She kept taking

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drinks out of the flask but a few moments afterwards her mouth would be parched. Her mind was continually with Duncan. She supposed it was on account of having lost Steve that she should have felt this sudden affection for Duncan. If he had spoken to her in the way he had while Steve had been alive she would have finished with him. When he had ever paid her any attention she had never dreamt that he had been in earnest. But he'd get over it; he came into the town fairly often and she expected he had a good time on the whole. He was well liked by the decent men in the town, she had heard Steve say. The boys who worked for him always had a good word to say for him. She was glad, for there might be a time when she might be forced to appeal to him for something and she knew she could trust him as long as she stood her own ground. In spite of the heat and her thirst she kept a look-out for McClelland's shack and was thankful when she saw it in the far distance. She could have a rest there and a wash. She opened her flask again. There was hardly a spoonful left.

McClelland was asleep on his bed when she arrived at the door. The heat seemed worse here. Hannah opened the door and called out. There was no answer so she went round to the back and

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shouted again. She thought: "Maybe he's the kind of guy that's gone into town and left the door open to anyone that has a wish to walk in." She hitched the bridle on a nail outside the door and walked in. The doors were open between the kitchen and the bedroom. There was a dirty cup and plate on the table. She didn't wonder the men getting married on the Prairie even though they seldom made a decent living. The men that weren't married lived in a kinder way that made you feel sick. Fancy, leaving a plate like that with the egg and bacon fat all dried on it about on a day like this. The rim of the plate was black with flies. The window was shut to keep out the mosquitoes, but for all that they were buzzing like an organ in the room. The sooner she had a wash, the better. She'd rather bear the heat outside than stay in a room the size of a gopher's hole. Now she heard a sound coming from the bedroom. She went as far as the door and saw McClelland lying on the bed. There was a smell of spirits in the room and she saw a whisky bottle standing like a sentinel just within his reach, by the bed. She stepped back and going to the door took a deep breath. She'd lead her horse round to the shed and take off the saddle; she reckoned it would be a relief to the poor beast. She'd give it a bit of a groom

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before they started off again. It wouldn't seem far now once they had had a bit of a rest. The stable was in a better condition than the shack, she thought. Maybe he was one of those who couldn't chore for themselves. He hadn't been out long and had a name of doing well with his horses and certainly it seemed that he looked after them better than he did himself. When she had watered her horse and given it a feed she returned to the shack and looked in the larder to see what food there might be. McClelland seemed to be rousing now, hearing her movements, and suddenly called out. She called back: "It's Hannah McCleod—you've heard of me?"

He got up from the bed and stood in the doorway, yawning. "Sure," he said, "I've heard of you. Where the hell have you come from—a bloody kinder day for you to be taking a ride."

"Didn't know it was going to be as hot as this. What, for Mercy's sake, is going to happen do you think? The end of the world?"

"Sure, no—a duststorm of sorts, I should say, and the sooner it's over, the better."

"I don't want any of that before I get into town, no, sirree, it can keep right off till I get to the Athabasca." Before he had time to speak, she said: "Maybe you haven't heard—Steve Sanderson

died three days ago. We were getting into town : he'd been sick a long while and he jest gave up half-way there. I had him dying under the trees half the night and nothing to do about it."

"Is that so ? Well, I'm darned sorry."

"Mr Duncan and his boys buried him and I've been with them these two nights. Now, I've got to shift for myself and the sooner I start the better. Steve died pretty well broke."

"Well, now, that's too bad." McClelland was looking at her sympathetically and collecting the dirty cup and plate off the table. He stood in front of Hannah, the sandy hair on his chest emerging through the open front of his shirt. "I'm sure glad you've come here on your way, you jest sit down and I'll get you a meal as quick as I can."

"Don't you worry, you jest tell me where you keep your food and water. Gee, it's water I want more'n anything."

He offered to go and get it for her and said he would go and see if there were any eggs in the nests. She asked if she might go into the bedroom and have a wash in the basin. The enamel jug was half-full of water and she poured it into the basin as quickly as she could and buried her head in it. Then she splashed the water over her arms which were red and swollen with mosquito bites. Perhaps

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she had been a fool not to have stayed on with the Duncans until the Fall. What had she been in such a hurry for just because Duncan had made a bit of love to her? She could have repaid Mrs Duncan for any hospitality by working for her and giving her a bit of a rest. She would have known that Hannah wasn't the sort that would let Duncan lose his head over her, though she might have had a bit of a time keeping him at a distance. But she'd chosen to leave and here she was feeling about as done up with the heat and mosquitoes as she could possibly be. She seemed to have started off on the wrong track right away—perhaps it wasn't the last mistake she'd make before she was through. Her superstition ran through her with the usual foreboding of evil. There was nothing to prevent her from resting the night here and returning to the Duncans the following day. James D. would give her a welcome, that was a cinch. But, no, she wouldn't do that. It might lead to something worse than the discomfort of this ride. It might be cooler in the town by the river and, anyway, she could rest for as long as she liked at the Athabasca. Edie Brown would get her a room cheap if she knew she was getting on the best side of Duncan.

McClelland was returning now with his hands

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full of eggs. He laid them on the table and said he would go back for more. Hannah dried her face in the handkerchief and went into the kitchen to look for the frying-pan. The oil stove looked a new one. She lighted it and placed the frying-pan on the top of it. McClelland came in with more eggs and said he would fetch the butter which he kept down the well in a bucket. Hannah started beating up the eggs and filling cup after cup with water and drinking it. This was a particularly barren part of the Prairie, and as she peeped out through the small window she felt she was glad to be getting into the town for a change. Gee, what a place this must be in the winter, when the snow was about, though there was something about snow which she didn't mind as much as the continual glare from the yellow grass. Now McClelland came back with an earthenware jug in which he kept the butter and put some into the frying-pan for her. When it was melted she poured in the beaten-up eggs. She realised she was hungry in spite of the heat. They were soon sitting down together—McClelland having taken a clean sheet of paper and spread it over the table. Hannah forgot the unsavoury appearance of everything when she had first entered the shack. Here was proof that you never met a stranger on the Prairie.

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She'd arrived out of the blue and was sitting down with a sandy-haired Scotch guy as though she had known him all her life. It was only a little over ten miles to the town now and if she went slow she'd do it in about two hours. Maybe, she'd have a rest for an hour or so if McClelland didn't mind.

He began to ask about Steve's ranch and what was going to be done with it. She told him it had been mortgaged and that James Duncan thought of buying it up. If ever Redcliff ran a successful boom any land around would be worth its weight in gold. It was no further from the C.P.R. than heaps of other places. McClelland said that that part of the world was favourable for those who wanted to farm, but as far as he was concerned he liked this distance from the town, though it was a bit lonesome. Even in the winter twelve miles hardly counted and it was flat all the way. A Ford could be run out easily—he was going to get one the following spring if he did well with his horses. They had finished the meal now and Hannah asked if he minded if she took a rest before she went on again.

"Stay as long as you like, it makes no difference to me." He went into his bedroom and took the sheets off the bed. Then he unearthed a red tartan rug from a cupboard and spread it over the mattress.

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From the same cupboard he took a clean pillow-case. Hannah took it out of his hand and started to put it on the pillow.

She looked at the rug approvingly. "Well," she said to him, "I reckon I ought to have dreams of Bonnie Scotland all right. Don't that make you feel homesick? I reckon Scotland must be a dandy place, and yet there's crowds that come out here and never go back again." She sat down on the bed.

McClelland was looking at her. "Ain't you Scotch?"

"The McCleods never come from Spain as far as I ever heard," she answered.

"That's a cinch. You been out here all your life?"

She nodded seriously. "Seems like a lifetime to me, yes, sir. But you never know, I may go so far east one day that I shall meet the west around the next corner. Well, if you don't mind, I'll lay down here and listen to the bagpipes and if the sun looks like setting, you jest let me know."

He began to move out through the doorway telling her he'd be around outside for some little time but that he'd keep an eye on the time and give her a call if she slept too long. She lay back on the pillow: her eyes were closing and she knew she could sleep the clock round if she got the

chance, but she must wait for that until she got into Redcliff. She wondered why she had hedged with McClelland like that ; why not have said that her parents had died ? Anyway, why worry ? Other folks she'd meet mightn't be as nosy as McClelland. She supposed he went for weeks on end without speaking to anybody but his horses ; she wondered men didn't go daft living such a deaf and dumb life. But perhaps that was better than living in a city where there was too much noise. The one consolation you got living either life was the starlit sky. At nights, whether you were in the city or out on the Prairie, if you tilted your head you saw something that made up to you for a good deal else that you knew you were missing. But she reckoned the Prairie would give you a night that would be hard to beat in any other part of the world. Steve had watched her once as she had stood at the door and come up to her and chided her with star-gazing. She believed, in the cities, as soon as it got dusk, the folks drew down their blinds or drew their curtains. Wherever she was, she would have her window open wide and lean out—better do that with closed eyes than have them open and the night hidden from your gaze. Her hand, which had lain spread across her chest, dropped and rested on the tartan rug.

CHAPTER VII

SHE woke to the sight of McClelland standing in the doorway winding up the clock. He told her he had come in to find that it had stopped but, of course, he could tell by the sun it must be near five so he had put on the kettle. He guessed tea would refresh her as much as anything unless she preferred whisky. He told her that the air was thicker than ever, though every now and again a breeze threatened to blow up. He said: "The farmers are going to get something that's been worth waiting for, believe me, and about time or there'll be hell to pay."

Hannah began to sit up. "Well, I guess Scotland's a good place for sleeping in—I feel real refreshed."

She washed again in the basin and listened to McClelland getting the tea in the kitchen. He was whistling a jazz tune and seemed comparatively cheery since her arrival. She thought: "Well, it's good to take advantage of folks' hospitality and feel you've done them a good turn." It seemed a long time since she had said good-bye to Duncan,

but now that she thought of him she seemed to see him, vividly, in front of her. He was tall, with a well-knit figure. His head was small, his face lean with clean-cut features. He had thin lips and hazel eyes. She was thinking of him, feature by feature, of his hands which had never seemed to coarsen as most of the other men's did. She wondered why she had never seen him to advantage all the years he had been coming to the shack. In the few days that she had been left to face life alone she seemed to have matured sufficiently to have lived a number of years. Perhaps it was that she was inexperienced for her age, and that in those few days she had only become normally wise.

McClelland was asking her if she took sugar in her tea as he was not sure that he had any. He had forgotten to bring any in with him the last time he had gone into Redcliff, and disliking tea without it, had had to resort to whisky in consequence. Hannah said she preferred it without. He had boiled her two eggs and was endeavouring to pierce the butter in the jar with a knife. She said she hoped she wasn't running him short with his stores. He assured her he had plenty of everything. Anyway, there was nothing to prevent him from going into the town as soon as the heat cleared off a bit. He didn't go in oftener than he

need as he found it a temptation to spend money, and he wanted to save till the spring.

"Seems to me that's a long way off—I wonder where I'll be."

McClelland was looking at her as she poured out the tea. She looked up and caught his eyes on her.

"You won't have far to look for a job," he told her, "putting it plain, I'd be pleased for you to stop right here, if you've a mind to."

She opened her eyes, surprised. "For the Land's sake, what do you think you're talking about?"

"We could get spliced."

"Sure," she said, "as easy as I'm eating this egg. No, sirree, the Prairie's been my home long enough—not that I don't think it's a mighty good place at times, but I want to get a bit further. All the same, you're a real generous man—half a dozen eggs, an offer of marriage and a rest in Bonnie Scotland all in one day: you're kidding your name's McClelland, I'm thinking."

"Well," he said, "if the town doesn't offer you anything better you can think it over."

"Thanks, Mr McClelland, I sure will."

He looked at her, a little sheepishly. "I'm not kidding—I shall sure hate to see you ride off."

"That's nice of you but it isn't very far. Maybe,

when I've got fixed up you'll be coming in and you can take me to the Hollywood."

"I'll be in, don't you worry."

"Well, I'd better be getting on: I'll go around to the stable. How did you think she was looking—able to finish the ride?"

McClelland nodded. "If you go slow. You'll get a breeze as you get near the river."

They both went round to the stable. McClelland brought out her horse. He saddled it and she said she'd go back to the shack and fetch her flask to fill from the well. He told her to wait and he would do it for her. He was willing to do whatever he could. She wondered at his alacrity, when he appeared half-alive and lackadaisical on her arrival a few hours before. She looked round the Prairie—at the haze which hung about everywhere. She asked: "Any fear of a fire, do you think?"

He shaded his eyes and gazed around, first in one direction and then in another. "Might be better if you hit the river trail, though it'd take over another hour and it's easier to lose your way."

"I reckon I'll risk it. Do I bear to the right till I reach it?"

He told her yes, that to keep straight on meant missing the bend that became visible after seven miles; by keeping to the right as though she was

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riding in a wide crescent she ought to find the way all right. She was mounted now, pulling her stetson as far over her eyes as she could ; hitting at the mosquitoes which once again were making a dead set at her hands holding the reins. She put out her hand to McClelland. " I'm sure grateful for all you've done for me, and you can take it from me Steve Sanderson would be grateful to you if he was here. Anything done for me he took it done for him a hundred times over."

They shook hands and McClelland told her not to forget she'd be welcome any darn time she cared to turn up at the shack. She started off, waving her hand and calling out good-bye. After a hundred yards she began to turn off gradually to the right as he had told her to do. She looked back once more and saw McClelland was still standing there watching her as she rode away.

Out of his sight she slowed down and thought that she would go slow until she was nearer the river where the air might be a bit cooler. Duncan came once more into her mind, and she tried to take her thoughts off him by wondering whether she was one of those who, once their life has taken a turn away from the past, find luck suddenly favouring them. She thought of the film stars,

who, from having a dime in their pockets one day, achieved a fortune the next by being called upon to take a part in a film. There'd be nothing like that waiting for her, but there were other things in life besides films, and supposing she could get down east as John Hedway had suggested, she'd be able to better herself, dress more like a girl and not in this kinder way she had always done on the Prairie. She'd learn to drop the slang she had picked up from the boys on the farm. Somehow, with Steve she had spoken well, but once she got talking to the boys she fell into the way of using the slang they did. She had ridden quite a distance now, and could not be further from the river than a couple of miles. The air, if anything, was thicker and the occasional breeze which sprang up was like a puff of fire. Her lips felt swollen and parched, and for the first time she took out her flask and started to drink. She had been afraid of taking it out before, for once you started drinking in this heat you couldn't stop, and then there was none left. She couldn't stop now. She drank what there was in gulps, as if she could not get it down her throat fast enough. It seemed tepid and hardly refreshed her. Well, she had better get on a bit faster now, for if a thirst got up like that again it would pretty near drive her mad. A sudden gust

of hot, dry wind seemed to push her over her horse's neck and she turned as if to see where it had come from. She tasted something like powder in her mouth. If this was the relief the river was supposed to bring her she wished she had gone by the other trail. She might be nearer it than she supposed but how could anyone see with this darned mist blurring the horizon and all the Prairie round! Again there was the taste of dust and grit in her mouth.

She pulled in her horse. Ahead of her now she thought she saw the bend in the river that McClelland had spoken about, and yes, a white cutbank was visible through the mist and she heard the rushing of the river. She must go slow. She'd make for the cutbank and nearby there'd be the trail, for people drove their autos out from Redcliff along here and it would be easy going once she found it. The heat was pressing down on her now so that she could hardly sit up in the saddle. Her horse seemed, on the contrary, to be raising her head and pricking up her ears. There was another sound now besides the rushing of the river. A hollow kind of roar. She turned in her saddle. It was coming from behind her where the heat had seemed to get greater a few minutes before. The wind now, instead of coming in gusts blew per-

sistently, growing stronger every minute until she had to put her hand on the mare's neck to keep herself back in the saddle. The wind, then, seemed to blow, first on one side and then on the other. She had to grip with her knees to steady herself in the saddle ; even the mare seemed to be trying to stand firm. The heat grew and the roar with it and seemed to compete with the noise of the wind as it grew stronger and stronger. It wasn't safe to go on trying to sit in the saddle : she swung her leg round and jumped to the ground. She was caught suddenly and twisted round in a frightful dizziness.

The horse whinneyed and started to go off at a gallop. She reached out for the bridle but could not stand up against the wind. It suddenly flung her down and carried her along towards the cut-bank. A tornado. They might all have thought of that instead of braying about a shower of rain. She tried to catch hold of the grass as she went rolling over and over, but failed. Then she felt herself falling down an incline where there were one or two bushes growing. She grasped one and held on to it with both hands. The roar was deafening though the wind had seemed to pass on a little. Now the air was filled with smoke. Looking up she saw flames which seemed to reach to the sky racing towards her like the Calgary Mail. The

river. She must reach the river. And where, for the Land's sake was the horse. Nowhere in sight. Steve's horse that was the one thing she had wanted to keep near her. She tried to stand up and run in the direction of the river. There was a spout of yellow dust looking like a gigantic corkscrew twisting its way to the sky about fifty yards away : it was rushing along—away from her, and the wind was coming back from it in fitful gusts, taking her breath away. The fire was nearer her and she shut her mouth keeping the smoke from going down her throat. She could see the river now, the cutbanks were low : if there was something to hold on to she would get in and stay till the fire was cut off. Her throat seemed almost to have closed up ; the smoke was in her eyes and she had, at last, to shut them and stumble forward as best as she could. She stopped instinctively a yard or two before she reached the cutbank. Then she fell forward and in another moment she found herself slipping over the edge.

CHAPTER VIII

THE flames reached the cutbank a moment after she had fallen into the water. She found herself sinking and at the same time being carried along by the current which was swift as it neared the bend about fifty yards further on. The water felt cold after the heat of the fire. The first time she came to the surface she saw that the flames had been checked by the river and had died down. The black smoke was being wafted across to the other side. The second time she came up she took a deep breath and started to struggle towards the bank. It seemed near and yet too far to reach. The water began to fill her mouth and she felt she must sink for good when she came up for the third time and found herself floating on her back, her arms outstretched. As she got to the bend the current, she knew, would get faster and she would have no chance of reaching the bank. But the current seemed to sweep inwards suddenly, and the next moment she found herself landed on to the cutbank which had been levelled by the tide. She laid there, partly covered by the water, her

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feet on the surface like two gigantic corks kept afloat by the current. Her breath came back to her in little gasps : she felt desperately sick and as though she would suffocate if she went on lying on her back. For a moment or two she was unconscious of any feeling, but then her own panting for breath roused her and she knew that there was a struggle she would still have to make before she was safely landed.

She moved her hands out : there was nothing to feel but mud—nothing to catch hold of. She dug her elbows into the mud and tried moving up the bank, inch by inch, out of the water. She laid still again, trying to overcome the feeling of nausea. She saw a little farther up the bank there were tufts of grass : if she could manage to reach them she could pull herself up. She felt heavy with her sodden clothes but presently managed to catch hold of the tufts of grass, till she found herself lying on the ground above the river. The noise of the tornado had died down and the fire was out ; the smoke drifted away to the south. Her throat had almost dried up in spite of the quantities of water she had swallowed. She turned over on her side and lay still for a long time. She must try, somehow, to find the trail and walk the distance into the town. If she took a rest now and again,

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it mightn't take too long. She wondered where on earth the horse had got to. She would have got away from the fire anyway and probably might turn up at some farm. She reckoned the grip would have gone and everything she possessed with it. Steve's Bible—if there was a thing she would have stuck to it had been that, but she'd never see it again, that was a cinch. She tried to get up from the ground—first on her knees and then, standing on her feet, she staggered a few steps forward. Her head reeled and she fell down on the ground. She'd lie quiet for a bit. Was it any wonder she felt like this—she'd get to town somehow ; she wasn't going to get scared. This way took her to the east side of the town. The track led round a bit so's you could get in another way round, but she didn't know whether she'd be able to find it. No one went the east side unless they had a mind to.

After a little she got up again. She was steadier this time. Her boots were heavy, soaked with water and her breeches clung to her legs, but she found she was able to walk a bit and started to stumble forward trying to find the trail. She knew it wouldn't be far from the river. The ground was rough. She kept stumbling over tufts of grass and nearly falling. But the ground began to get smoother, and, plodding on for another fifty yards,

she came to the track. She sank to the ground and laid still again with an extraordinary inertia she had never known before. It was as though, for a few moments, her mind stopped working and her muscles relaxed: only her heart kept on with thumping, regular beats. Presently she got up and started off again. Her head reeled but there seemed to be more strength in her legs, even with the weight of her sodden boots weighing them down. Fancy, if Duncan had an idea that this was happening to her! A mighty lot of use in doing what you thought best if this is what came of it. Suddenly she remembered the money he had given to her. She put her hand in her pocket. The notes were still there but sodden—just a pulp. As she drew them out they came to bits in her hand. She squeezed the water out of them and tried to separate them but it was useless and she let the whole lot fall to the ground. Gee, a hundred dollars. What was she to do now? She couldn't send to Duncan for more. Not that he wouldn't be ready to give it to her. Two hundred if she wanted it. Maybe Edie Brown would let her have a little when she arrived at the Athabasca until Duncan came in again. She found she was able to move forward a little quicker now, only stumbling if her foot caught in a gopher hole or on a mound of grass.

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It might be only four miles now into Redcliff. With another rest she might be able to reach the Athabasca before midnight. Her heart sank when she thought of the distance ahead which had to be covered. She tried not to think of it. There was nothing to prevent her from lying down and waiting till the worst of the fatigue had worn off, but she hadn't a mind to sleep out on the Prairie all alone. The thought of the Athabasca was tempting enough to help her to get as far, if she was able. She found her thoughts travelling back to Duncan again and the emotion they had both felt at their parting from each other. She wondered whether the tornado had swept through Redcliff, and whether she would find much damage had been done.

The air was cooler and the mist had disappeared, but there was still a haze from the dust. She had not noticed the sun setting on account of it, and it seemed to be getting dark quickly now. She rested again. This time sitting forward and holding her head in her hands. They were swollen with mosquito bites, and felt stiff. She was beginning to feel numb, and as though her sense of realisation, was leaving her. The hope of reaching the town spurred her on once again, and after she had gone a bit farther she thought she saw a glimmer of lights coming through the mist. It might not be

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far now : she would take another rest ; it would not be too late by the time she reached there now.

She was beginning to feel she could go no farther, when she came to a steep cutting which led down a hill. It was easier going than along the flat. The road was thick in dust, but was softer to walk on than the Prairie had been. At the bottom of the hill she saw that a side-walk of planks had been made, which showed she had reached the outskirts of the town. Ahead of her there were one or two bungalows and shacks—a distance in between them. They were ramshackle looking, there were only dim lights in one or two of them, and she felt afraid to appeal for help to anyone who might be in them. Her throat was parched and it was an agony to swallow : at times it felt as if she was choking. It was easier to walk along the wooden side-walk, though her feet seemed so heavy she could hardly drag them forward now. It might not be far to the Athabasca once she got to the end of this street. Every now and again her eyes closed and she stumbled off the plank. There were more bungalows now, grouped nearer to each other, but all looking uninviting. She guessed this was the dago part of the town, and it would not do for her to ask admittance anywhere.

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Now she came to a store. There was a light burning in it, but there was no one serving behind the counter. Above the store was a two-storied house. There were lights in most of the windows and the curtains were drawn. Men's and women's laughter came down to her as she stood looking in at the window. A cigarette store. There were packets of cigarettes, boxes of cigars ; bags of Bull Durham and pipes. Cheap pipes tied together in bundles and better ones in cases : cherry wood cigarette-holders and packets of chewing-gum. She moved along to the doorway. Up in a corner of the store there was a packing case. She lifted one foot and rested it on the step. There was the packing case in the corner and she felt an overwhelming desire to sit on it. She went slowly over to it and sat on it. It was high and as she leant her head against the wall she was conscious of a profound relief. She seemed to float upwards until she was resting high above everything on a cloud. Then, after a moment she came down—down, with the same floating sensation and seemed to know again how good it was to be leaning her head against the wall like that and have her feet off the ground.

She did not know how long she had sat there—when she opened her eyes and saw him standing

in front of her, looking down at her a little amused. They stared at each other for a moment : then he spoke to her : “ All in ? ”

She nodded. He looked up the stairway. They could hear the sound of the men and women laughing and talking. He waited a moment then bent forward and said : “ Can you manage the stairs ? ”

She shook her head. He came round to her side and lifted her off the case in his arms and started to creep up the staircase. He paused half-way as though uncertain after all of going on, but in another moment he had reached the landing. He held Hannah tightly against him and opened the door of the first room he came to. He quietly switched on the light, and, closing the door, turned the key in the lock. Hannah had slid a little out of his arms and her feet were resting on the ground, but now he picked her up again and carried her over to the bed. He laid her on it. She laid inert there with her eyes closed. He stood looking down at her. With the relief of her limbs resting she had the sensation of floating up and hovering on a cloud, then the descent as before, and the realisation that she was lying on something soft. Presently, she opened her eyes and looked up at him. He bent over her. “ Feeling better ? ” She nodded. “ I

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think," he said, "I had better go and fetch you something to pick you up."

She tried to smile. "I reckon I've been picked up if you ask me."

He laughed softly and said: "I think I was just in time, in more ways than one."

She said: "Do you reckon I could have a drink of water, gee, I'm parched."

"Are you sure there's nothing else you'd rather have?"

"Sure—water's all I want."

He went to the door and opened it quietly. She heard him turn the key in the lock. Presently he came back, locking the door on the inside, this time. He filled a glass and held it out to her. She tried to raise her head from the pillow but found she couldn't so he bent forward and slid his hand under her head. The glass felt like ice against her lips which were swollen and cracked with the heat of the fire. As she took the first sip she felt as if her throat had been slit open, but after that it didn't hurt so much and she drank what was in the glass in one or two gulps. She looked up at him. She said: "Gee, that was good."

He laid her back on the pillow again and took the glass over to the dressing-table, then returned

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to her side. She asked him: "Do you reckon this is far from the Athabasca?"

"The Athabasca—no, not far: why?"

"That's where I was making for."

He waited a moment. "What on earth made you come in here?" Her head had fallen to one side and he saw that she had dropped off to sleep. She looked absurdly young. Her shirt was open at the neck and he saw that the mosquitoes had bitten her mercilessly. Her hands were swollen—he wondered whether there was anything he could do. Then he noticed that her breeches were sodden and her boots as well. She'd had a ducking. Where, for God's sake? She looked as though she might belong to ranch people on a biggish scale. Where on earth had she come from? He wondered, as she had mentioned the Athabasca, if he ought to go round and make enquiries as to whether anyone was waiting there who might be anxious about her. But that wouldn't do. He did not wish anyone to know at the Athabasca where he was spending the night. He would wait till the morning. There was the sound of a door being opened on the landing above and a woman cursing someone who was coming down the stairs. Obviously she was drunk. She was being told in language, to equal her own, to get back into the

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room and shut the door. There was the sound of a scuffle, a noisy tumbling down the stairs, and the bang of the door above. Then it was silent again, but for the occasional laughter coming from the other rooms.

He must rouse her and tell her to take off these wet things. He took up one of her hands and patted her on the arm. "I say, you're wet through, if you don't get these things off, you know what it means in this part of the world—rheumatic fever and God knows what."

He sat there on the side of the bed for a moment or two, now and again patting her arm but he could not rouse her. He covered her with the blanket and first, pulled off her boots. It was a hard job for they clung to her feet like limpets with being so wet, and he wondered the tugging at the boot did not waken her. She laid like a log. At last he managed to get them off: then her stockings. Where on earth had she been, everything was sopped through. It couldn't have been the river: once in she could never have got out. He slipped his hand under the blanket and unstrapped the belt round her waist. He put his hand under her and gradually pulled off the breeches. By rights, she should have a good rub down. He tucked the blanket well round her. Then he picked up the

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sodden things off the ground. He hung the breeches over the back of a chair in front of the window and the stockings over the brass rail at the foot of the bed. Then he stood looking down at her again. There was nothing else he could do. He threw the cushion off the chair and gave it a kick up against the wall. Then he sat down and took off his shoes. Still looking at her he took off his tie and collar and threw them over on to the dressing-table. Then, stretching himself on the ground he endeavoured to sleep.

CHAPTER IX

HE woke early, cramped and cursing at his discomfort. Why on earth had he not lain down beside her? Goodness knew, there was more than enough room. Probably, she would laugh at his—there was no word to account for this dam-fool game of sleeping on the floor. He tried to move but the side on which he had slept had pins and needles the whole way down. He waited a moment thumping his hip and rubbing the life back into his leg. Then he got up gradually until he was on his feet and limped over to the bed. She was sound asleep. The swellings on her hands had gone down and her lips were not so swollen. She looked altogether different. He sat at the end of the bed and went on rubbing his leg. He wondered again, whether someone was going off the deep-end about her and whether he really ought to try to get into touch with them. But, perhaps he had better wait. After all, she did not seem to be bothering her head about anybody the night before.

He started to put on his shoes. He washed and put on his collar and tie. Presently she opened

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her eyes. It seemed strange not to have the breeze blowing in at the window, but to feel the air heavy and the room darkened with the drawn curtains. He stepped over and sat at the end of the bed. She smiled at him. He picked up her hand and gave it a little shake. "Cheers," he said, "do it again."

She went on smiling at him. "Seems like I've been to sleep."

"You certainly have."

She caught sight of her breeches hanging over the chair in front of the window. "Oh, say——" she began.

He laughed. "It's all right—I did it quite tidily. I tried to rouse you but couldn't. You were soaked through: you know what that means out here: rheumatic fever and never the same again. Why the bathe?"

"Do you mean to say you didn't get that dandy typhoon here?"

"It swept round the north side: some of the bungalows on the hill got it rather badly but otherwise it gave Redcliff a miss."

"Gee—I was about five miles out and got into the middle of it: Prairie fire as well, and the only thing was to make for the river. And would you believe me, soon's the fire went out I got landed on the cutbank."

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“ How did you get as far as this ? ”

“ Walked. My horse made off : I feel wild over that. Steve’s horse and my grip tied on at the back.”

“ Who’s Steve ? ”

“ The man who brought me up. He died a few days ago, and I’d ridden in from Two Creeks, thirty miles from here. I gotta get a job.”

“ What hard lines. You said you were making for the Athabasca. Is there anyone there who’s going off their head about you ? ”

“ Nope, there ain’t anybody to worry over me but there’s a girl there—Edie Brown. Mr Duncan knows her and he said, maybe she’d put me wise about getting some work and give me a room cheap till I got it.”

She started to inspect the room. The furniture had once been white enamel but was now a dirty cream and the enamel knocked off most of the corners. The bed was brass but the lacquer was blackened and peeling off along the rail. There was a wash-basin in the corner nearest the window. Hannah asked : “ This a hotel or what ? ”

“ Not exactly.”

She frowned. “ It ain’t a place they call Jefferson’s.”

He nodded. Her eyes widened with horror. “ Oh

gee, where'll I land next. That's a dirty trick for you to play on me—carrying me up those stairs."

"But how was I to know? You were sitting there."

"What's your name?"

"Dawson."

"Well, Mr Dawson, you get me outer here, quick. Do you reckon anyone would see me if I slipped out and got round to the Athabasca?"

"I'll tell you what I'll do: I'll fetch a car and drive you round."

"Sure, that'd be a heaper use seeing how I lost all the money Mr Duncan gave me."

"Who's Mr Duncan?"

"The folks I stayed with these last two nights."

"But you wouldn't be paying for the car."

Hannah looked at him. "You're kinder hopeful, ain't you, Mr Dawson. If everything else has gone, I reckon, I've got two legs left and there's nothing the matter with them." She kept her eyes on him for a moment, then said: "Seems a kinder pity for a man like you to come to a place like this."

"I don't usually."

"Only once in a while, eh? Well, I reckon, that's often enough."

He said, a little lamely: "I'm on a survey camp

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twenty miles south of Rowell. I'm the topographer. One can't help going off the deep-end occasionally."

"Steve would have had a fit if he knew I'd land in a place like this: he didn't know I'd ever heard of it, but some of the boys used to talk and the women as well. After all, I suppose there ain't much use in keeping a girl in the dark. I reckon I'll get on my things and get round to the Athabasca."

"The fellow that cooked for us out in the camp got blood-poisoning and I couldn't stick the food that the man who took his place sent in to us, so I've come in to take somebody back with me." He paused. "Can you cook?"

"Better than most things."

He looked at her thoughtfully. "You literally haven't anyone in Redcliff to take you under their wing?"

"Nope. I'm jest on my own and it seems mighty queer. I don't know whether to be glad or sorry."

"I was thinking—though it sounds rather futile—how would you like to come and cook for us out at the camp? There are nine men and they're all—bar one—a decent crowd. Just now, we get off first thing in the morning and don't get back till about seven in the evening. I'm not the boss

of the show, but as a matter of fact he leaves a good deal for me to see to."

"Sure, I'd come. I'd sooner work for a bunch of men than women, any day."

"I should see that it was well worth your while. Of course, there is a fixed screw allowed for the job, but as it's on my account I'm fetching someone in who can give us something fit to eat—I shall pay the difference myself."

"I should have to buy a few things before I came out, and I ain't got anything to buy it with. I lost everything when the horse made off."

"You can have something in advance: don't worry about that."

"Do you reckon I could get up now? I'd sure like to get out of this hole."

"I'll go round and fetch a car from the Athabasca. How'd it be if you came round to the Reindeer—I loathe the Athabasca—and had breakfast with me?"

"The Reindeer! Why, you got to be a Rockefeller to put a foot inside there. Look at me. I ain't even gotta comb."

He laughed and put his hand in his pocket. He took out and handed to her a minute case. She took it from him and unclipped the flap. Inside was a small comb.

“ Well, I reckon I’ll have a wash.” She looked over at the basin. “ There don’t seem to be a towel anywhere.”

He put his hand in his pocket once again and this time handed her a handkerchief. It was folded in a square and had a monogram in the corner. Presently, he left her and she heard him turn the key as he went out. She threw the blanket off her and slid off the side of the bed. She felt dizzy and stiff and sat there for a minute or two holding her head. Then she began to creep quietly over to the wash-basin. It gave her the creeps to think she was in a place of this sort—she didn’t want anyone to hear her moving about. She turned on the hot water tap and put her hands into the basin. The inflammation from the bites had gone down considerably. She washed herself and dried her face with the handkerchief. As she unfolded it she looked at the monogram. A large E, another letter and the D. The water refreshed her as she splashed her arms with it and held the handkerchief soaked in the water against her throat. Now, hadn’t she been lucky after all !

When she had finished washing she looked round the room. It was not inviting looking. But still, what matter, when she had fallen on her feet in a most wonderful way. She’d soon be out of this

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place and round at the Athabasca. Her breeches were still wet and her boots as well: she didn't know how she'd ever get into them again. Maybe Edie Brown would lend her some things to go out shopping in. She took the comb out of the case Dawson had given to her, and going over to the dressing-table, started combing her hair. She ought to get it clipped before she left Redcliff. She reckoned, wearing it long like this made her look younger than she need.

She sat on the edge of the bed and pulled her breeches on. They felt cold against her legs. She thought: "If I don't get like a bit of chilled meat I'll say I'm surprised." The boots needed endless tugging before she got them on. In a moment she heard a car drawing up outside and then Dawson unlocking the door. He came into the room closing the door quietly. He said: "There's no one about—are you ready?" He stepped outside on to the landing then beckoned to her. She crept down the stairs after him. As she got into the auto he jumped in at the other side and started off. They had reached the end of the street and turned up Fourth Avenue before she realised what had happened. He drove slowly then. The breeze blew in at the side, and Hannah put her hands to her head to keep her hair from blowing about.

He drove to the end and turned along Fourth Street which would take them, a little farther along, by turning to the right into Main Street, at the end of which was the Athabasca. Hannah had begun to think what was the best to do, straight go off. She did not see how it was possible for her to go to the Reindeer with Dawson until she had bought some clothes. How could she appear in the sodden breeches and crumpled shirtwaist? She glanced up at him. "I reckon," she told him, "it would be best to leave me at the Athabasca and after I've had some breakfast I'll hustle around and get the things I want."

"Just as you please," he said, "I'll go around to the Reindeer and I'll ring you up about eleven-thirty. We might have lunch together if you've got all the things you want. The Mail leaves about two: we shan't have too much time."

Before he drew up at the sidewalk he brought out of his pocket a small bundle of notes and put them into her hand. She thanked him and held them tight. Dollar notes were doubly precious since the loss of those which Duncan had given to her, and which had vanished only too soon. Dawson drew up outside the Athabasca and she got out of the auto. He told her: "I'll ring up about eleven-thirty. So long."

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She smiled at him and went up the five steep steps of the Hotel. The door was open and she went through it. The bell-boy was cleaning out the vestibule—polishing the leather of the big settee, and the chairs which were pushed into the corners. Edie Brown had not yet made an appearance. The porter was putting the morning mail into the rack, taking infinite interest in the address on each of the envelopes. The bell-boy grinned at Hannah. She walked across to the counter.

“Any chance,” she asked, “of seeing Miss Edie Brown?”

The porter looked round. Without saying anything he took the receiver off the telephone at the counter and spoke to someone. He looked over at Hannah. “What name?”

“Hannah McCleod—say I have a message from Mr Duncan at Two Creeks.”

She thought; “That will fetch her.” She was right. The porter turned round.

“Number fifty-four,” he said. “Second floor, third door on the right.”

Hannah started to go up the stairs. They were wide and shallow and she soon reached the first floor. There was the sound of water running into the baths in each of the bedrooms. At the end of the corridor there was a chambermaid standing

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outside a door with a tray in her hand. Hannah went up the next flight of stairs. She walked along until she reached number fifty-four and knocked on the door. Someone called to her to come right in. She opened the door. Edie Brown stood at the foot of the bed clad in a kimono and a pair of green moccasins. "Say," began Hannah, "I reckon you'll think it mighty queer me turning up at this hour of the morning. You know about Steve Sanderson?"

"Sure. James D. told me a day or two ago. I guess it's too bad, he was a real nice man."

"I oughter to have turned up last night but I got landed in that tornado and believe me I was near drowned in the river—lost my horse *and* my grip with every darned thing that I got in the world and all the dollar notes in my pocket soaked like a bit of bread in the soup."

Edie Brown had started to brush her hair vigorously. "My! If that ain't the limit. Come right in." She shoved a chair towards Hannah and pointed a finger at it.

Hannah sat down on it. "Yes," she said, "I spent the night with some folks—I was all in. I wondered whether you gotta room here: not a swell one; the smaller the better. It's jest for the morning."

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Eddie was brushing the back of her hair as if her life depended on it. "There's number sixty at the end of the corridor. A guy's taken it for to-morrow night but it ain't wanted till then."

"I came in to get a job: maybe I'm going on to some folks I know. I jest wanted to stay here for an hour or so."

"Sure," said Eddie, "and what's the message from Duncan?"

"Well, he told me to tell you he hoped as you'd see I gotta room and anything else he could make good when he came in next time."

"I sec—he was real thoughtful."

"Sure. Mr Duncan and his wife are good folks if ever there were any." She glanced at Eddie Brown. It wouldn't do to let her think that she and Duncan were too friendly. She got up from the chair. "Maybe I could find my way along to room sixty."

"Sure, you ring the bell and you'll get all you want. Anything I've got you're welcome to."

"Thanks," said Hannah, "my horse jest took all I'd got in the world along with her and I guess I'll never see that grip again, s'long as I live."

"Would you believe it." Eddie Brown was putting the hairbrush into a drawer of the dressing-table and patting down her hair to set the waves at the back. She flicked a bust bodice off the back of a

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chair and started to slip her arms through the ribbon armholes. "You getta long," she said to Hannah, "I reckon you'll want breakfast soon's it's served."

Hannah went along the corridor and found the door at the end with number sixty on it. She turned the handle and went in. The room was small but the bed looked comfortable. There was a wash-basin with hot and cold water laid on and a dressing-table with a good-sized mirror in it. She'd have a wash and tidy her hair and get down to breakfast before any of the other people got around. She rang the bell. Presently a chambermaid knocked and brought in clean towels and a cake of soap. She put both in their place and turned to Hannah. "Is there anything else you'll be wanting?" She spoke with a soft Irish brogue. "And aren't you the dead spit of a sister I have at home in the old country, so you are: are you out yourself long?"

"Do I look it? No, sir, I've been in this country all my life: but you never know; one day I may getta chance of getting across."

The chambermaid stood in the doorway. "Well, let me know if there's anything you'll be wanting. You're looking a bit whisht."

Hannah nodded to her. Seemed as though looking like nothing on earth didn't prevent folks

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from being as kind as they knew how. So far, she'd nothing to grouse at. She took out of her shirtwaist pocket the comb which Dawson had given her. She stood in front of the mirror and combed her hair. She must get it clipped before she was through with her morning's shopping. And she must write to the Duncans. She'd tell Mrs Duncan she might be getting a job with some folks she'd met and she was quite all right. She'd write a note to Duncan and leave it with Edie Brown. She wouldn't be able to say very much for she wouldn't trust Edie half an inch—she didn't know why Duncan could think so much of her, but as long as he liked having a letter left in her charge, she supposed it was all right. Her throat was still sore and every time she swallowed it felt as though someone was cutting across it with a saw. As her breeches dried they seemed to get more and more uncomfortable. She wondered whether Edie Brown would lend her a coat to wear when she went out to buy the things she wanted. And a hat as well. She could not go along Main Street without a hat. She opened her hand and looked at the wad of notes Dawson had given her. She unfolded them. Fifty dollars. That was a hundred and fifty given to her in the last twelve hours and she'd lost a hundred of them. She might consider these her

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month's wages in advance. The job would only last till the end of the summer and then the camp would break up, but even so, she could put by enough to see her through the first weeks when she would be looking for other work.

She made her way along the corridor, down the stairs, through the vestibule into the dining-room. There were one or two people already sitting at the various tables—she guessed they had probably got off the Mail and come across from the dépôt. She sat down at a table in the near corner and began to study the menu. Wasn't this a change to frying the rashers as she was used to doing.

The waiter soon came up to her and she told him what she would have, saying that she was in a bit of a hustle and she'd be real glad if he could serve her soon. He returned with her grape fruit right away and presently came along with the cereal and the cream. As she began to eat she realised how hungry she was after having had nothing since her meal at McClelland's. The electric fan above her cooled the air around and she felt refreshed after the heat of the day before. The sooner she could get out of her breeches and boots the better she'd feel. She didn't want to run the risk of getting any sort of a cold. What a relief it was to think she would not have to go around to any

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women trying to get work, and that she was to start right away working for a bunch of men who likely as not would give far less trouble than half a dozen women put together.

Just as she was finishing her coffee, a man, who had been sitting further down the room, walked past and looked down at her. She kept her head bent. He stood in the doorway and lit a cigarette, still looking pointedly in her direction, but she never raised her eyes and presently he went on through the vestibule. When she had finished she nodded to the waiter. He went over to her. She told him to keep her bill till later on. "I'm fixing everything with Edie Brown." Then asked him: "Happen you knew Steve Sanderson?"

"Why, surely."

"He's dead—had you heard?"

"You don't mean to say—Isn't that fierce!"

Hannah stood up. "Fiercer for me than anyone would know," she said. The waiter wrote something on the pad in his hand and asked her to hand it to the porter and have it put in Edie's desk if she was not already down.

Back again, walking along the corridor on the second floor Hannah knocked, once again, on Edie Brown's door. She was still in her room but ready to go down when Hannah knocked. Hannah asked

her : " Could you lend me a coat that would cover up these things I've got on, I must sure look queer to the folks here dressed as I am. And a hat of sorts, I'd be sure grateful."

Eddie Brown pulled out a drawer in the chest by the radiator. She threw a frock on to the bed and pulled out the bottom drawer out of which she fetched a small felt hat. She went to the wardrobe then and unhooked a light tweed coat with stick-up collar. " You're welcome to these things, though they've pretty well gone west."

Hannah said : " Thank *you*, they're just fine. It's jest while I fix myself up before I go on to these folks I spoke off."

" Anything else ? "

" I wouldn't say no to a pair of shoes, though I reckon I take a bigger size than you. These boots are jest about getting me stiff."

" What size's yours ? "

" Six."

" Well, these are a roomy five—my feet got frost-bitten last year and never been right since : maybe they'll do." She held the shoes out to Hannah.

" Thanks," said Hannah, " I should say you're real kind, Eddie Brown. Anything I owe to the hotel Mr Duncan will pay when he comes in a day or two. Steve has some money in the bank and

Mr Duncan's going to see to everything when he gets in."

She went along to her room and laid the things Edie Brown had given her on the bed. She put on the coat first. It was slightly large for her as Edie Brown was on the plump side, but it was long enough, which was all to the good. Next, she put on the hat, tilting it back and a little on one side as she had seen hats worn in pictures. How different it looked to the old stetson Steve had always encouraged her to wear. She wondered why he had never seen that she had the kinder things that other girls wore—then hated herself for having any but loyal thoughts towards the man to whom she owed everything. She could never define what it was in her that made her recoil from anything that was coarse and uncultured when she had never been used to anything else. Not that Steve Sanderson had been actually either, but Prairie life was what it was—rough. The life was like the soil given to those whose only hope of living on it was to break it up and make out of it what they could. She thought of the Homesteaders who came out in shoals from every part of the world as though they were coming to a land flowing with milk and honey and perhaps, the first winter, they would be faced with hardships such as they

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had never dreamed of and with them, a blank despair.

She pulled the brim of the hat down and stood looking at herself in the glass. She appeared to herself, already, as a different person. Her spirits rose. She put the little wad of notes Dawson had given to her into her pocket. She'd spend as little as she could, though there was a heap of things she wanted. Gee, when you started knowing what you hadn't got there was no end to the things you had to buy. She'd go to a store at the end of Main Street which she always preferred to the big store that aped Eatons and didn't give you anything half the value of your money. She knew a girl at this other store who'd give her a hand at helping her choose what she ought to get.

She went along the corridor and down the stairs. The bell-boy grinned at her and ran over to open the door for her to go through. She smiled back at him and went down the steps which led on to Main Street. When she arrived at the store she saw it was too early for anyone to have started their shopping. She was relieved to see the girl she knew at the counter. She went up to her. "Well," she said to Hannah, "if this ain't some surprise. I haven't seen you for a lawny time. What's brought you in?"

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“ You’ve heard me speak of Steve Sanderson—the man I lived with out on the Prairie—well, he died a few days back——”

“ You don’t say ! Well, if that ain’t the limit, I should say.”

“ I’ve come in to getta job of sorts.”

“ Well, I reckon you won’t be sorry to get into the town and say good-bye to the Prairie.”

“ Do you know what you’re talking about ? I should say not. There’s heaps of places worse than the Prairie—believe me. Well, there’s a heaper things I got to get and I’m depending on you to help me to get them. I’m going to some folks and I haven’t gotta thing. I got caught in that darned typhoon and would you believe me, my horse made away with my grip and everything that was in it.”

“ That’s too bad. Have you made a list ? ”

“ No —I’ll jest have to do a bit of thinking. I reckon stockings is the first thing : not too good, jest to knock around in.”

She looked above her head and saw stockings of different shades dangling from a bar. She asked :
“ What about those ? ”

“ Two fifty.”

“ Is that so ? Well, I reckon they can swing in the breeze a bit longer.” She looked at the girl

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across the counter and felt inclined for a moment to tell her she was going out to the survey camp as cook, though she wouldn't want anyone else to know. She'd known this girl quite a while. It wouldn't hurt to confide in Irma—that was her name, she remembered now. No good to ask her to fix her up if she didn't know what sort of a job she had to be fixed up for. She leant across the counter. "I'm going south as cook on a survey camp."

"A survey camp—my! You're crazy."

"It's a friend that's got me the job." She wasn't going to tell too much to Irma. "He says they're a decent lot——"

"You bet your bottom dollar they'll be as bum a lot as you're ever likely to meet."

"The pay'll be good; that means a whole lot to me."

"Ah-ah?"

"And I can always quit."

"That's cinch." Irma was reaching for other stockings in a box on the shelf behind her. She took them out of the box and held them out to Hannah. "Eighty-five, how'll that do?"

"Fine. I reckon I shall want four pairs or say three, and if I want any more, maybe one of the men will be coming into town now and again."

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Shoes is next and overalls: I got to get pretty well everything that is to be got, only I got to go steady with the money."

They went from counter to counter. It was too early for any other shoppers to have come down town. She felt she was spending more than she ought but she found she could make no comparison between the inferior and the superior. It was the latter that got her every time. There were green linen overalls and brightly-coloured jazz-patterned ones at which she could not look once, having on the green linen. She had nearly everything she needed when she looked at the clock. She must be back at the hotel when Dawson phoned. If she went back now she'd have time for a bath before he rang up. She didn't know when she could get her hair clipped. She felt relieved that she was getting away from Redcliff, instead of having to be looked at by countless women who would pay her twenty dollars a month and expect her to work as though she was being paid fifty. Give her men, every time. She looked at Irma. She knew, in her heart, that it was to get away from such as this girl, she felt relieved to be leaving Redcliff. There were times when it was not good nature that she needed but something indefinable. She knew that the ones to be appreciated were those who had

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but a dime left in their pockets and who would give it to any who might need it as much as themselves. At Christmas time few lacked for anything because of others' generosity: any of the women would die twice over to give another something that was needed. She wondered whether the intangible thing for which she sought would be worth any more than these others could give her. She would give anything to lose the feeling of disloyalty she felt towards them and the man who had given everything he possessed to her.

She had everything now and paid Irma from the notes Dawson had given to her. It took a good many: she wouldn't have much left by the time she left Redcliff. She must go to the drug store and get soap and a toothbrush, then she'd get back. She wanted to be in the vestibule or near it when Dawson phoned. She didn't want Edie Brown to get her message.

On her way through the vestibule she told the bell-boy to put her parcels in her room when they arrived as she was going to have a bath. She was expecting a phone-call about eleven-thirty and he'd find her in her room if she hadn't already come down. She went upstairs. She undid the parcel she had brought from the drug store and took out the things. Any money Steve had ever given to her

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had never lasted so as to buy the sort of things the man in the drug store had pressed her to buy. She unwrapped the soap from its celluloid wrapper and held it to her nose. Lilies. Well, it was about time she knew what they smelt like. And the face flannel, the first she had ever had. She had always been content with a piece of flannel cut from the tail of Steve's old shirts. The tears suddenly came into her eyes. How she hated to think that what Steve had had to give her hadn't been good enough for her. She took the towel off the rail and picked up the soap and the other things she needed and went along the corridor to the bathroom. The smaller rooms hadn't their own bathrooms. She soon had the bath full, the steam moistened the walls and ran down in little trickles to the porcelain sides around the bath. She mustn't be long or Dawson would be phoning before she was ready. She started to take off the clothes Edie Brown had lent her and hung them on the peg behind the door. The warmth of the water inflamed the mosquito bites. She held her arms out of the bath to relieve them of the irritation. Then started to rub the soap on to the face flannel.

When she got back to her room she found that the boxes had been left and that the bell-boy had

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put them on the bed. She untied the string and took the lids off the boxes. One thing she would have to get was a grip, either a big one or two smaller ones, it didn't matter which. She stood stripped and put on the things she had bought one by one. She hoped the time was not slipping by too quickly: she had Dawson on her mind all the time and yet wanted to give her attention to this new experience of dressing like an ordinary girl. She'd return Edie Brown's things to her room and then if she tied up the boxes she'd be ready when the phone rang. She rolled up her breeches. They were still damp and the boots as well, but they would dry once she got out to the camp, and she would want them out there. She was just on the point of going down when the bell-boy came up to say she was wanted and that there was an extension half-way along the corridor. She told him to take the boxes out of her room down to the vestibule: she'd be down in a minute. She went along the corridor and took up the receiver. Dawson's voice came through from the other end. She answered him: "Sure, I've got on fine, got all I want. See here, I reckon it's best for you to call around here for me and have me to go around to the Reindeer with you."

“You reckon, do you? As you say: I’ll be round in about twenty minutes.”

Hannah ran down the stairs. She went to the counter behind which Edie Brown was standing. She was leaning over talking confidentially to a man who lolled across the counter. That was as well, Hannah thought, as she wouldn’t want to ask too many questions as to where Hannah was going. She said: “See here, I want to pay for what I’ve had—I’ve got enough left, though if I haven’t, Mr Duncan will see to the rest when he gets in in a day or two.”

Edie Brown took her attention away from the man leaning over the counter, and said: “Sure, no, that’s all right: don’t you worry. That room was booked but the guy ain’t coming till to-morrow.”

“As you say. I’m going to write a letter for you to hand to Mr Duncan—jest to say I’m fixed all right.”

Edie nodded and slid back to the man. There was just time to write to the Duncans before Dawson called for her. She hoped Edie’s attention would still be held when she went through the vestibule again. She sat at a table in the lounge and wrote a few lines to Mrs Duncan and then to Duncan. There wasn’t much she could say, but he would guess that she was too wise to make any allusion to their mutual affection for each other.

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She was afraid to let him know about the survey camp. She guessed he'd ride straight there and take her away. Once she'd arrived there, and felt she hadn't been so crazy as she might even think herself, she might tell him, but not before.

Presently she went back to the vestibule and asked the bell-boy to bring her boxes down the steps. Edie was still talking as confidentially as ever, but looked up and waved to Hannah as she saw her disappearing through the door. The auto was coming down the street. She had timed everything just about right. Dawson got out and opened the door for Hannah. The bell-boy put the boxes in the back of the auto. Dawson tipped him and he grinned his thanks. Then Hannah got into her place and as the bell-boy slammed the door Dawson went round to the other side and sat beside her. They shot off and tore to the end of Main Street, then to the left, along Forty Second Street. Dawson drove slower. Hannah looked up at him. He'd had a shampoo by the scent which the breeze wafted towards her. It reminded her of her own need of a haircut. He looked down at her and smiled.

"Got all you want?"

"Sure, only I want my hair clipped. Do you reckon I'd have time?"

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He often laughed when she spoke to him as though she had said something amusing. "You can have that done at the Reindeer, they have a saloon there."

"And a grip. I can't lug these boxes wherever I go and I didn't think about it till I got back to the Hotel."

"I'll send an order along from the Reindeer: there's only one store and unless you get the expensive sort they're all one price and kind. What size do you want?"

Hannah held her hands apart. "I reckon about so."

"Right. We shan't have too much time. The Mail will drop us at Rowell and then we drive the rest of the way in a Ford that Noah would probably have booked if the ark had failed at the last minute." He said suddenly: "Do you know I haven't the slightest idea what your name is and it would be just as well if you told me."

"Hannah McCleod."

"Well, Hannah, this is where we alight."

He drew up outside the Reindeer and jumping out opened the door for her. It was queer to have doors opened for you like this and get helped out of the auto.

There was only a small vestibule at the Reindeer.

Along one wall there was a settee covered in brown corduroy and a chair pushed into each corner. Through the doorway there was a small parlour which served as a lounge. Dawson took Hannah through and made her sit down on the settee. He took out his cigarette case and offered her a cigarette. She told him she did not smoke.

"If that's the case you'd better see about your haircut and I'll phone up about that 'grip'." He smiled at her. He lit his cigarette and glanced across the lounge. "Ask that antiquated mollusc sitting behind the counter. Don't be too long."

Hannah walked across to the counter. Behind it there was a small man sitting in a low chair reading a *Saturday Evening Post*. His head came only just above the counter. As soon as he realised Hannah wanted to speak to him he jumped up and she asked him whether there was any chance of getting a haircut. He told her: "You go alawng the corridor—you'll see the door."

She went down the corridor and saw a man in a white drill coat coming out through a door with Ladies' Saloon painted across it. "Are you busy?" she asked him, "'cause if you ain't I gotta job for you."

He opened the door wide and ushered her in.

Hannah sat in the chair and was enveloped in

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a large mauve overall. The man spoke in a slightly foreign accent. He looked at her hair hanging down to her shoulder blades. "Hair grow quick," he said.

"No, sir, it does not, I like it lawng."

"A shampoo?"

"Haven't the time." She wondered whether he would take as much interest and trouble if he knew she was going out on a survey camp with a bunch of men. He urged her to buy various lotions and shampoo powders. She shook her head. "Castile soap's been good enough for me these past ten years," she told him. She was looking at herself in the glass amazed at the difference every cut of the scissors made. The man smiled at her. "Pity not to have a shampoo," he said.

"I gotta have my lunch and catch the Mail: there ain't very much time."

"You going East?"

"Sure," she said and did not satisfy him any further. He produced a small brush and brushed the nape of her neck: then he tilted her chin and brushed round her throat: finally he took off the overall and handed her her hat. She paid him and walked out, down the corridor and through the hall. Dawson was still smoking in the lounge. He smiled his approval when she made her appear-

ance. The haircut had certainly altered her, though he had rather liked the quaint look her long hair had given her before. He piloted her away to the dining-room and chose a table at the far end of the room. There was no one else there as it was too early. They sat down and Hannah was conscious of Dawson looking at her. He asked: "Have you any violent likes or dislikes?"

"I reckon out on the Prairie we didn't get a chance: we used to get pretty much the same all the year round."

He said: "Say that again without reckoning."

She frowned for a moment as if puzzled, then flushed.

"We used to get pretty much the same on the Prairie all the year round."

"That must have been a bit monotonous."

"You haven't much time to think about that out there."

"What will you have to drink?"

"Ice cream soda's a treat to me," she said, "hardly ever coming into the town."

"What besides?" He handed her the menu.

She said: "Seems to me I don't feel so hungry as I ought to; I reckon going on a journey kinder takes your appetite away."

"Does it usually have that effect?"

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“Can’t say—never been on one before—least-ways, not on the Mail.”

She was scanning the menu quite uncertain as to what she would have. As she held the menu in one hand she put the other to the back of her neck. It felt queer to be free of the long hair now it had been cut off. It really didn’t matter what she had, and yet she went on looking at the various things mentioned as being served that day. Dawson held the top of the card in his fingers.

“Don’t look so worried.” She let him take the card out of her hand. “You have a long way to go,” he said, “not that it’s counted long out here, but the drive is a bit of an adventure. You’d better have a fairly substantial meal. I’ll do the ordering and you’ll have to eat whatever is put before you.”

“Sure, I will.”

Through the meal he told her a little about the camp. There was a fairly large dining-shack and two smaller ones. Most of the men slept in tents and there was an office-tent and cook-tent. The man who occupied the smaller shack would have to turn out for her and share a tent with one of the other men. The camp was pitched under a hill. About five miles away there was a lake—they got some good shooting there and one or two

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of the boys had made a raft and paddled about on it. The country was flat round about but for the hill where they had pitched the camp. At present, they went a few miles south so that they did not return for the midday meal which they usually had when they were prospecting. So during the day she would have a bit of time to herself once the breakfast was over and done with. There was nothing else to be done till the evening: the men did their own chores like washing——

She asked: "Do you do yours?"

He laughed: "Heavens no! There's a youth—a college student from the East—who plays the Jonathan stunt to me. God knows what he does with my socks; they're like boards when he's finished with them."

It all depended when the Fall set in as to when they would return to the town.

She was looking down at her fruit sundae which had been brought to her and the sprinkling of walnuts over the top as she listened to him.

When they had finished he handed her a note and asked her if she would mind going into the vestibule and getting so many packets of cigarettes—Players for choice—six bags of Bull Durham and as many candies for herself as she liked. Then she had better put the things into the two grips

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which, by now, ought to have been sent round from the store. He would follow her when he had settled the bill. She went through the vestibule to the counter and started asking for the things Dawson had told her to get. She wondered who the Bull Durham was for. It was a present. Dawson wouldn't be doing errands for anyone, she felt certain. From the counter she went into the lounge and found the grips on the table. She untied her boxes and put the things into the grips : they fitted in well. It was good feeling you had something belonging to you after never having much to count as your own. Presently Dawson appeared and told her they had better be getting across to the depôt. He called the bell-boy to take the grips and put them into the car. As they went through the doorway they heard the bell clanging on the engine. Dawson helped her in beside him. It was queer to think she was leaving Redcliff—she wouldn't be seeing Duncan as she had promised him, but it was just as well. In her momentary excitement he did not seem so necessary to her. He had hardly come into her mind since she had come in to the town and it was only yesterday they had both said good-bye to each other. Now, she and Dawson were at the depôt. He was looking after her as though she belonged to him, and as though

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he had known her for a long while. They went through on to the platform and past the long carriages. Hannah climbed up the steep steps helped by the coloured attendant who bent down and held out his hand to her: he took the two grips and told her and Dawson to follow him. The three of them walked down the long thickly-carpeted aisle. People looked up from reading their papers and playing cards at the tables in front of them. When they came to the two vacant seats at the end, the attendant put the grips up in the rack. Hannah sat down in the corner next the window. She could not realise she was actually on the Winnipeg Mail, going off with a man she had not known twenty-four hours before, to a survey camp to cook for a bunch of men. Through the window she saw the last three letters on the board which showed the depôt to be Redcliff. They looked gigantic through the glass. Dawson was tipping the negro attendant and he grinned, showing his white teeth. The bell was clanging louder than ever and the guard calling out "all aboard." They started to move in jerks and then the wheels smoothed themselves along the line as the engine moved quicker and quicker. Hannah leant her head back. A little farther along they would come in sight of the river and the bend,

where only yesterday she had nearly lost her life. She closed her eyes.

Dawson sat and watched her. He wondered how they would take it at the camp his bringing a girl out, which, ordinarily, was against the rules. He'd risk Riley kicking up a fuss. He had acted on impulse. It would be perfectly easy to bring her back to Redcliff if she wanted to come. He leant forward to tell her so in case she might suddenly regret having said yes to his suggestion with such alacrity. But he saw that she had dropped off to sleep. She did not rouse till they reached Rowell, when he gently tapped her on the arm and told her he was afraid she would have to wake up.

CHAPTER X

THERE was a porter on the platform who, after the Mail had once more jerked on its way, came towards them, nodding to Dawson. He took Hannah's grips up from the ground. The three of them walked along the planked platform to the shack which served as booking-office and waiting-room in one. There were advertisements of farmsteads for sale, on the walls, snapshots taken from an advantageous view pinned to the side of them and large posters of the Rockies and Lake Louise. Outside, there was the Ford Dawson had spoken of. The springs of the driver's seat were broken and sank down on one side. The seat beside it was not much better. Dawson saw Hannah inspecting it at close quarters. He laughed. "What did I tell you?"

The porter put the grips on the floor at the back. Hannah got in and was surprised to find it was not so uncomfortable as it looked. Dawson got in beside her. They started off with a bound and tore away, Hannah bumping right out of her seat. Dawson slowed down. "I'm most frightfully

sorry, I quite forgot. It isn't as bad as this all the way : the track, for some inexplicable reason improves as we go along. After a moment he suddenly laughed and said : " I'd love my people to see me."

" For Mercy's sake, why ? "

" They might be amused, that's all." He went on : " They need amusing occasionally : they have rather a ghastly time. My eldest brother was shell-shocked in the war."

" Were you in the war ? "

" The last three months."

" The whole lot from Redcliff got in for that first gas attack. Only a few came back. I reckon you may have seen Sandy Morris walking down Main Street. He lost both arms. They say he laid the tram lines at a place down East all on his own with iron that any other guy would have thrown on the dust-heap."

The trail had become smoother and Dawson was driving as carefully as he could. He told her the men would not have arrived in from their surveying when they reached the camp and anyway she was to get to bed and have a good rest before she started in doing any work. She said : " I reckon, the man you're turning out won't be too mighty pleased to see me."

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“He’s not being turned out—he’ll have other work to do ; cooking’s not his job. The food he sent in was perfectly putrid.”

Ahead of them now was the hill under which the camp was pitched. Dawson pointed out the direction of the lake. He said they would ride over there one evening when there was a moon. The flatness of the Prairie around reminded her of the approach to the Duncans’ farm. Now the tents were visible, and the big shack. Seeing so many together, where quite a crowd could live all at the same time, took away the idea of intense loneliness which she might have otherwise felt. She had often wondered why such distances were chosen to lie between each farm and ranch, isolating folks and making them feel so far from each other. As they got closer Dawson hailed a man who was leading two horses across the pitch. He came towards them just as Dawson stopped the auto. He called to the man to come over to him. The man dropped the horses’ bridles and they followed slowly after him. Dawson said : “Rickman, this lady has kindly consented to come out here and cook for us : will you take her grips over to Pearson’s shack and take his things into one of the others’ tents. How’s Kelly ? ”

“Real bad : how could you expect anything

else ? They're going to move him in so's to catch the night Mail now that the auto's back. I guess the doc will have something to say to Riley for not having him sent in before. Playing about with a gash like that that's got poison in it. Looks like a Goddam mess up, that it does."

"I'll go and have a look at him."

Rickman nodded in a friendly way to Hannah. Dawson helped her out of the auto and they crossed over to the smaller of the two shacks which was about fifty yards from the big one. They waited outside while Rickman removed the things which belonged to the man who had been occupying it. It was small but looked clean. Besides the bed there was a packing case in front of the minute window which served as a dressing-table and a chair. A few nails were hammered in behind the door and on one hung a shirt and a tie. Rickman removed these and anything else that was lying about and left Dawson and Hannah together. Hannah sat down on the bed. Dawson stood in front of her, looking down at her. "Are you cursing me ? "

"Why, no, this is jest fine."

He looked at her for a moment. "I know who it is you look like—Gretel, in Hans Andersen's Fairy Tales. I shall call you Gretel."

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"Fairy tales! For the Land's sake, you don't mean to say you believe in fairy tales?"

"Of course I do. I've got a large edition with me illustrated by Rackham. Now, look here, I want to settle about how much you're to get. The fixed wage is twenty-five a month, and as you have come out here for my benefit I shall contribute another fifteen. Is that all right for you?"

Forty dollars a month! And he was asking her if it was all right!

"The man—Taylor, who has done his best to poison us all, will give you a hand with things. For God's sake don't go and overdo it. Let me know at once if you want to quit."

"I shan't want to quit: make sure of that." She was looking up at him, and he smiled down at her.

"Taylor will get the breakfast in the morning. You are to have a rest, do you hear?"

"As you say; I reckon I'll be glad of a rest."

"Well, good night. I'll tell Taylor to bring you over some food presently. I hope you'll sleep well."

"You bet I will."

She watched him go across to the dining-shack and then closed the door. She looked through the minute window. It was open and had a mosquito

curtain nailed over it. The sun had gone and the hill at the back cast a shadow across the camp. It had covered the tents where the men slept and was creeping slowly over her shack. There was something about it that made her shiver. She turned away and had a look at the shack. The bed did not look too uncomfortable and the blankets on it were clean. She would soon make things look a bit more homelike. She started to open the grips and take a few things out she had bought in Redcliff. By the time she had finished getting everything there had not been much left out of the amount Dawson had given to her. But if she was going to get forty a month while she was out at the camp she'd be able to put by a bit by the time she moved into the town again. She didn't know what would happen then : best not to look ahead. She thought of Steve and how long it seemed since she was with him at the shack. She had thought she was going to get away from the Prairie and that she had finished with it for good and yet, here she was back on it once more. Would it always claim her and deny her that which she felt she had wanted to go in search of ? But what had she to grumble at ? There were heaps in the world that hadn't a dandy little shack like this to themselves and two new grips full of things that

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anybody'd be glad to call their own. Worse things might have happened to her than coming out to a camp like this, even if she would have preferred to have got away from the Prairie. There were worse places than the Prairie. If the sun scorched, the wind cooled : if the winter froze you, the spring warmed you through again : what you lost, you sometimes found : God gave and God took away. It was for her to get on with life and make the best of it. She took the pillow off the bed, and giving it a good shake, she put it through the window on the ledge to air.

CHAPTER .

SHE was woken the next morning to the sound of someone tapping on her door and telling her there was a tray outside with a teapot of tea for her. She called out her thanks and got out of bed. She opened her door and took in the tray. As well, an enamel basin, a jug of hot water had been left, and a towel, which was rough, dry but clean. She placed the basin and jug on the packing-case. Some camp! where you were waited on as though you were in a swell hotel. She got back into bed and lifted the tray on to her knee. Underneath the cup there was a note. It was from Dawson. She opened it and read it. He hoped she had had a good night and felt rested. He had had to leave the camp early but hoped to see her as soon as they got back in the evening. Whenever she wanted her breakfast Taylor would give it to her in the dining shack. He would show her round afterwards as she would want to know where the stores were kept, etc. She looked at his signature—Evelyn C. Dawson. She thought of him as she had seen him first when she had opened her eyes, sitting

on the packing-case at Jeffersons. Evelyn C. Dawson. She put the note on the blanket in front of her and started to pour out her tea. She wondered what the time was; the sun was well up. She felt wonderfully rested: her throat hardly hurt at all as she swallowed her tea and the swellings on her hands had quite disappeared. The man at the drug store had given her something to keep the mosquitoes off. The tornado had cooled the air, even as far from Redcliff as this. She wondered whether her horse had turned up at any farm and whether there was ever a chance of seeing it again. Anyway the grip would have gone. She mustn't stay too long in bed: there'd be a heap to do. When she came to do it, it might prove too much. She reckoned the man whose place she was taking would have cut up rough to hear she'd arrived out, but if she hadn't come somebody else would have. Before she dressed she took the blankets off the bed and hung them out of the window. When she got time she'd wash them out—they'd dry in the sun in a morning. Later on, she'd tidy up the shack; maybe she'd find another packing-case somewhere and use it to keep her things on.

When she was dressed she went over to the dining-shack. Each side of the door there were nailed moose skulls, and over the door, the skull

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of a smaller animal. The door was slightly open and she gave it a push and went in. It was a large room with a long table down the middle made from planks of wood and laid on trestles. The seats were planks of the same kind. There were one or two camp beds against the walls and chairs made from packing-cases. On the walls were nailed C.P.R. posters of Banff and the Rockies. One or two rifles stood in the far corner. Here and there were hung up canoe paddles and coyote skins nailed to the walls. Hannah thought: "Well, I reckon men can make a place comfortable as well as women." There was a door at the far end of the room: it was half open and she supposed that it led out to the kitchen at the back, for she heard the sound of men's voices. She went across and looked out through the doorway. A few yards away there was a small shack: smoke was coming from the chimney. Rickman was leaning against the doorpost and laughing and talking to whoever was in the kitchen. He stood up when he saw Hannah and nodded to her. She went over and looked inside the kitchen.

Rickman said: "Taylor, this is where you quit."

The man he spoke to turned round and seeing Hannah he smiled at her. "Sure," he said, then

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holding out a hand to Hannah, "pleased to meet you."

Hannah said: "I'll say you're taking my coming in the right way, I thought, maybe, you'd cut up rough."

"Sure, no, don't you worry any. I ain't a cook I know, though I guess the others would have swallowed what I sent in—still, I don't blame Dawson. I ain't losing my job, he's seen to that—I gotta help you with things."

"That'll be great."

Taylor told her he'd bring her in breakfast: after that he would show her the ropes. Things weren't too bad. The oil stoves burnt well. There was the stove which was alight now and which he lit if there was any chance of the oil giving out before more was fetched from the dépôt at Rowell. The bread was sent from the nearest town by rail, three times a week. They got their eggs from a farm about five miles away. All the stores too, came by rail and were fetched in once a week when they brought in the bread. There wasn't much variation. Canned mutton: canned salmon. Canned tomatoes with both dishes. The three of them discussed the ways in which canned food could be cooked, all agreeing that there was only about one way and that everyone took—stewing

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it. Hannah told them she hadn't had to depend on canned meat so much where she'd come from. She thought she'd let them know about as much as they need, of herself. She'd lived at Two Creeks and there was cattle around : the ranches were on a pretty big scale that way. As she talked to them Taylor put rashers of bacon into the frying-pan. Hannah realised she was hungry and returned to the dining-shack. She stood in the doorway looking out over the Prairie. Her spirits rose considerably. She was anxious to begin her work. If she did odd chores for the men she might earn a little extra. She would see that the tents and Dawson's shack were kept in good order. The smell of coffee came floating in to her from the kitchen and in a moment Taylor came through with her breakfast on a tray. He placed it on the table and she sat down on one of the seats. She told him she wouldn't be long and then she'd come out to him and be told what there was to be done. He told her : "There was some hell of a fuss when Riley was told last night that Dawson had brought you to the camp, but I reckon you'd gawn to sleep and didn't hear any of the shindy. But you needn't worry any : Dawson puts it over Riley a wonderful lot. Takes his helping, Dawson does, of whatever's going, but not unless he's entitled to it."

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“It was up to me whether I came to a survey camp or didn’t. I was on the look-out for a job that made it worth while my taking it on, and do you know what some dames offer a girl for doing their chores in the towns? Mind, I know times are bad but that’s not saying I encourage them to come my way, no, sir.” She looked at Taylor hard as she told him this, continuing: “I’d come in to the Athabasca ’cause a friend of mine sent me there that knew Edie Brown. I met Mr Dawson and when I heard what he’d come in Redcliff for, well, I was willing to take my chance.”

She started to cut up the bacon and fill her mouth so Taylor should take the hint to leave her to finish in peace. He said: “It’s as I said—don’t you worry any.”

She told him: “You’ll sure know if I start worrying.”

Taylor left her and she heard him whistling in the kitchen. She felt relieved that he had shown no unpleasantness in her having taken over his job. Through the window she saw Rickman go by in the direction of the corral. As soon as she had finished she picked up the tray and took it out to the kitchen. Taylor had finished washing up the breakfast things and was trimming the lamps. Hannah stood by his side and watched him. He

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seemed a good worker and she wondered whether Dawson would find her cooking any better than Taylor's and whether he had found fault because he happened to be fastidious. Supposing she did not suit, and he sent her away. She suddenly felt sick. The idea of getting into an auto and being driven back to the depôt was the one thing which she felt she could not face.

Taylor showed her where the stores were kept ; a little away from the kitchen so that the shed kept in the shade sooner than if it had been a bit farther out. The water was fetched from a well about a hundred yards away. He would do all the fetching and carrying that had to be done. The men usually got back about seven or a little after, and liked their supper as soon as they had had time to have a wash and a tidy up. They had breakfast about seven in the morning, so it meant early rising, but once it was all cleared away and the supper prepared there wasn't much else to do until the evening. He usually cooked the eggs and bacon in the big aluminium dish and placed it on the table for them to help themselves from. The plates were left in a pile and each took their own as they needed it. He made a large pot of tea and one of coffee and they took it in turn to have whichever they liked. He'd never been in a camp where things ran as

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smooth as they did in this one. Kelly had gashed his hand opening a can of fruit and he'd tied it up with some Goddam rag that had been lying about in some muck or other and what could you expect. He took her over to the store-shed and took out as many cans of meat as he used for the evening meal. She looked round for a bag of flour.

"Flour? I guess we ain't got such a thing."

"No flour—you can cook all right, I should say. Next time you fetch the stores in, you bring a bag. What do you reckon you thicken the gravy with? And what hopes of a lemon pie?"

"Say, Ma'am, you're in a survey camp."

"Don't I know it."

Once the stores were left ready for the evening she went across to her shack and began to straighten it. The few things she had brought could be kept in the grips. She'd ask for a few more nails and hammer them in so she could hang her overalls in the corner. She intended inspecting the tents and if the men objected to her tidying them up they only had to say so. She would even dare go into Dawson's shack and let him realise, when he returned, that there was a woman in the camp and one that knew how to look after things. When she had made a general inspection she would take

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a rest for the afternoon, for the first meal would be a bit of a bother, maybe, and she wanted to give them something worth eating.

Two or three times during the day she opened Dawson's note and read it. It seemed quite a time since she had seen him. She would have to make her peace with the College student whom Dawson had told her looked after him, or rather his socks, which was much the same thing, for if you bothered to do one for anyone you did the other, and she intended to do both for Dawson herself. If she was asked, *this* was the sort of job that was as likely as any to take her mind off her loss of Steve. Life would seem pretty much the same standing over a stew-pan or sitting with a sock over her hand. She reckoned she'd have no time for star-gazing: when she had finished with her day's work she'd be ready to shut her eyes to stars and everything else.

She went across to the kitchen in good time to prepare the supper for the men. Her knees were shaking and she could not think why she should feel queer turning out this first meal. Goodness knew, she'd cooked for a bunch of men as many times as she could count and she didn't think these would be more difficult to please. But there was

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Dawson. She wanted to please him. She had had more than her first month's wages in advance, though she had not spent it all: but it wasn't so much that she was thinking of her wages as the fear he might consider her cooking little better than Taylor's. She took particular pains with everything she prepared. Taylor carried in the plates and put them in their places. He told her that the men could always be seen a long way off and that he would tell her when she could start dishing up. A little while after he came in and nodded: "Won't be long," he said, "they're coming at a good pace."

She had her back to the door and did not see Dawson as he came into the kitchen. She turned round suddenly and found him standing beside her. He looked at her and smiled: "How are you getting on?"

"That's for you to say in half an hour's time—I'm jest scared everything's not going to be all right."

"Of course it will be. I'll just go and wash a little of this confounded filth off me."

She dished up and Taylor started to take the supper through into the dining-shack. When everything had been taken in she leant against the packing-case which stood at the side of the stove, the sweat pouring down her face. The stoves,

burning for so long in the small shack, made the heat unbearable. There was only one needed now and that for heating the water to wash up the dishes. She started turning the wicks down and when she had done so leant against the packing case again, her eyes closed, overcome with the heat. She was suddenly conscious of Dawson standing in front of her. He took hold of her arm and persuaded her to move over in the direction of the door.

“What are you thinking of? Come along in——”

“I reckon I’d rather wait.”

“What utter nonsense. Come and meet the rest of the men: they’re dying to meet you.”

He took her along with him, and as they entered all the men stood up and looked at herself and Dawson. Dawson still had hold of her arm. “Miss Hannah McCleod,” he said, “Riley—Boyce—Pringle—Pearson and Hull.”

She smiled at each of the men in turn and they nodded back at her. Riley, the boss, much older than any of the others, put out his hand to her. “Pleased to meet you, ma’am, though I’ve given Dawson a bit of my mind for bringing you out to this camp of ours.”

“I needn’t have come if I hadn’t a mind to.

I had to get a job and I'd sooner work for men than I would for women, that's a fact."

Dawson sat at the head of the table and Riley usually on his right. Riley now moved up along the bench and made room for Hannah in between them. The rest of the men sat down and Hull started to help them all out of the dish. Taylor and Rickman came in and found places for themselves. Dawson asked in a general way, how news was coming through about the ex-cook, who had gone off the night before to the hospital in Redcliff. They all reckoned whoever went to the dépôt the following day in the auto, had better phone through. If he'd turned the corner by then he'd be on the right track, if he hadn't he wouldn't have to bother about cooking for any darned survey camp any more, that was a cinch. Half-way through the meal Riley looked down at Hannah and smiled. Then turning to Dawson, he said : " Dawson, my quarrel with you's ended. Ma'am," he said to Hannah, " you sure can cook." Hannah coloured. It was good to be relieved that much but it didn't quite remove her fear of Dawson's opinion. He said nothing but looked at her for a moment, rather intently. She liked Riley. He must be near sixty ; his hair was grey. He was quiet but Hannah felt he was keenly observant all the time.

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She was quite certain nothing escaped him. When he looked across the table at any of the others he screwed his eyes up as though very long-sighted.

Pearson and Hull sat opposite to her : they were both College students. It was Pearson who, as Dawson had said, played the "Jonathan" stunt towards him. Boyce was the next in age to Riley and was draughtsman to the survey. She did not take to Pringle who was a bit facetious and endeavoured to make Hannah feel, by glances, that he was worth her attention. When the meal was finished Taylor removed the plates and dishes. The men started to light their pipes and sat on the camp beds round the shack. Hannah went through the doorway to the kitchen. Taylor told her the dishes were placed in a large bowl outside, the boiling water poured over them, then they were dipped into another bowl of cold water and placed on the top of a packing-case to dry. Nothing was wiped with a cloth but the forks. The knives were thrust into the earth until they were cleaned. Hannah stood looking down at the bowls of water.

"Well," she said, "that's man's way of doing things, sure, I'll go that way about it to-night, but that don't mean it'll be that way every time."

She went into the kitchen to put on her overall and when she came out again Dawson was standing

there. He said : " You needn't worry over this —Taylor'll do it."

" He can give a hand, sure, if he wants to." She was rolling up her sleeves. " You don't want to stand there and get splashed : you'd better get along in so's I can get on with my job."

For a moment Dawson stood there lighting his pipe and then he moved slowly round the side of the dining-shack. He would have stayed but it wouldn't do to allow the others to think he was in any way interested in her. He had vouched to Riley she was straight and that if he found any of them making up to her in any way he'd make them regret it. He wasn't going to let them think otherwise by any action of his own.

The washing of the dishes didn't take as long as Hannah expected. If Taylor was a poor cook he was an efficient worker. While Hannah wiped the last of the forks on a cloth he stuck the knives into the ground and pulled them out miraculously shining. The plates were piled on top of each other for the morning, the knives and forks with them. Hannah was tired but content to think the first evening's work had been got through successfully. She would have liked a word of approval from Dawson, though she thought she had seen satisfaction once when he had looked at her during

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supper. After all, she guessed she could serve anything up as well as they had had at the Reindeer.

When the work was finished she went across to the dining-shack, and as she passed through she called out good night to the men who were sitting round. Riley called: "Good night, ma'am, I hope you sleep well." Some of them were playing poker, others just smoking -tired with their day's prospecting. They all made a move as she walked through. Dawson jumped to his feet and reached the door as she went down the steps. He stood in the doorway and watched her. As she opened the door of her shack it swung right back and she had to reach out and pull it to in order to shut it. She saw Dawson looking after her and waved her hand to him. He waved back conscious of Riley watching him as he sat at the table playing poker with Pringle and Boyce.

CHAPTER XII

THE first few days passed quickly, for she had to find a methodical way of going about her work in a place where method, before, had not entered into the scheme of things. She refused to stay in a camp that was in the least bit disorderly, and she found the tents needed a deal of time given to each of them. She collected collars, socks and shirts, remembering whose was whose, washed them and laid them in a neat pile on the chair in each tent. Once the breakfast was on the table there was no dawdling, for the men would have laid in bed up to the last minute. The evenings had begun to draw in so that they could not stay out quite as late as even a week before. Hannah liked each of the men individually, especially Riley, who treated her with a certain decorum, making her feel that it was an honour to have her out at the camp cooking for them. The second evening she had been in the camp he had walked slowly beside her when she had gone over to her shack. When they had gone half-way he stood still and said good night. "Ma'am," he said, "'case there should be any

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bears round these hyar parts I'd advise you to draw your bed up against your door so's you won't come to no harm, but there's no need for you to get scared 'cause my tent is as near your shack as any and I'm one of those folks has gotten mighty little sleep since that hot weather kinder did us in."

Hannah smiled: "I sure hate bears, Mr Riley, but I reckon we ain't as near the Montanas as all that."

He pointed south. "Not so far, ma'am, as you might think."

Pearson she liked for his reserve and his plaintive playing on a violin in his tent in the evenings when the others were playing poker or lying on the camp beds smoking. Pringle she disliked. He did not disguise the fact that he wanted her and forced his attention on her whenever he thought Dawson was out of the way. Sometimes he would try and forestall Dawson when Hannah might stand at the door, the supper having been dished up, waiting for the men to come in from their tents. She liked Boyce. He was short compared to the other men. Hannah standing beside him had to look down as she spoke to him. He, like Hull, was very reserved and seldom talked to Hannah, but if he thought that none of the others were near, he would stand outside the shack and tell her of their day's pros-

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pecting. He would point with the stem of his pipe the direction in which they had been that day. It had a great attraction, he admitted, this exploration of barren land and preparing it for possible flourishing cities or railroads. It might begin as a town ready for emigrants from the old country to make of it what they could. He wondered where the spirit of the pioneers of old had disappeared to. Certainly it couldn't be found in either America or Canada in the present day. They did not know what tradition meant.

Most mornings she stood and watched them go off for the day, each of them with their apparatus and the tripods strapped together. After they had gone a little way Dawson would always turn and wave to her. Then she would return to the kitchen and get on with the day's work, thinking of him. In the evenings when the supper was ready to be dished up, she would stand on the step and watch for their arrival back. From a long way off she would distinguish their forms, Riley and Dawson nearly always a little ahead of the others. Each day they worked nearer the lake and she knew from which direction they would come.

As the sun set, its light was reflected from the lake and the shadow began to creep over the camp until it seemed to envelop the tents, one by one,

and finally the shacks. It often made her shiver, she could not tell why. She wished the camp had been pitched a little farther away from the hill, though she knew they were there for the purpose of being protected by its shadow. The men took a little time to wash and get tidy, and whilst they were doing so Hannah and Taylor would start dishing up and taking everything in for them. Since the first evening she had changed her place between Riley and Dawson and now sat the other side of Dawson and opposite Riley. He induced her after the first few evenings to sit for a while in the dining-shack with them, after supper. She was conscious of them, as she had been with the boys at Two Creeks, sitting silent at times and looking at her as if they were hungry. Twice Dawson went straight out of the dining-shack across to his own without saying good night to her so that she sat listening to Riley telling her yarns with her mind following Dawson, wishing he would come out of his shack and join her as she sat there on the step. She couldn't get up and go off to bed for Riley would know how she felt. As she watched Dawson disappear through his doorway she counted silently the number of days she had known him, as though she was asking herself what kind of crazy idea she was getting hold of.

One evening, Hull and Pringle went into Red-cliff for the night. Hannah was sitting on the step; Dawson on a chair just inside the door-way. Riley, Boyce and Pearson were playing poker at the table. Dawson leant forward and said to her: "If you come over to my shack I'll show you a picture of a perfectly good fairy."

He stood up and pulled her up from the step. They crossed to his shack. As they went she said: "I reckon you're joking."

"I'm not—I love fairies." And then: "Why do you reckon so much?"

They had reached the shack and he pulled the door open. Everything was neat and in order, for she took particular pains to look after his things. There was nothing lying about but the things which he had taken off when he had come in and thrown over the back of a chair. She took them up: folded them together and placed them at the foot of the bed. He gave her a gentle push backwards so that she found herself sitting on the bed. She looked up at him. She had grown thinner since he had brought her out to the camp. Her hair had grown longer again and she looked more as she had the first night he had met her. Once sitting on the bed she said: "Steve was always on at me for using the slang the boys did."

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"Tell me about Steve." He knelt down and pushed the lid of a cabin trunk open.

"You couldn't find anybody like Steve if you searched the whole world over, that's about as much as anybody could say about him 'cause you couldn't say enough if you tried all your life." She found the tears were making her eyes smart suddenly as though the recollection of Steve had overwhelmed her. Looking at Dawson searching through his cabin trunk for something he wanted, she felt she had vindicated herself for ever having a disloyal thought towards Steve.

"How did you come to be living with him?"

"My parents died and I'd nowhere to go—I don't remember, but that's what he told me."

He had taken a book out of the trunk now and was turning over the pages. Presently he held it out to her and she looked at the illustration. He said: "Don't you think there is a resemblance?" She sat for a moment contemplating the illustration of Hansel and Gretel outside the little house.

"Maybe." She turned over the pages, staring long at each illustration.

Presently Dawson said, softly: "Hooray! She likes fairies." He took out another book and taking the Hans Andersen from her, laid the other in her lap. She read the title. *The Tragedies of William*

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Shakespeare—for Mercy's sake, how many did he have ? ”

Dawson threw his head back and laughed softly. “ A good many,” he said. He took the book out of her hand and turned over the pages. Presently he read : “ Give me my robe, put on my crown, I have Immortal Longings in me : now no more the juice of Egypt's grape shall moist this lip : ” He read on to her. She watched him, never taking her eyes off his face.

When he stopped, she said : “ Read that first part again.”

“ Give me my robe : put on my crown ; I have Immortal Longings in me.”

“ What are those ? ” she asked.

“ What ? ”

“ Immortal Longings.”

He laughed. “ Something that is no earthly use having in a survey camp.” He placed the book in her hand. “ Would you like to take it across with you and read it in your spare time ? ” He replaced the other book back in the trunk and let the lid fall down. She got up from the bed with the volume of *Shakespeare's Tragedies* in her hand. They crossed over to the dining-shack and she put her head inside the door and called out good-night to the three who were playing poker. Riley looked

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up : " Good-night, Ma'am, I hope you sleep well."

Dawson walked over to her own shack with her. He stood by the door while she lighted the candle. The flame died down and then suddenly burst brightly. She turned and faced him. He said : " Good-night, Gretel, sleep well."

She closed the door and for a moment leant her head against it. She heard his retreating footsteps as he walked over to the dining-shack. An indescribable loneliness came over her. She had seemed to find something a short while back, but now it seemed as intangible as the thing she thought she had found. Queer, she should have met, right away, someone who stood for the difference which she knew existed between the life which had been hers and the one lived by those not connected with the Prairie. With these thoughts came, as always, a feeling of disloyalty towards Steve and the rest of those who had been her friends in the past. The men here at the camp were as good a bunch as you could meet anywhere, but there wasn't one she would marry if it was the last thing left for her to do. The Prairie. It seemed to hold her fast in its grip, but there was something here she had found along with it. How silent it was, though she could hear

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the men laughing and talking in the dining-shack.

She slipped off her clothes and got into bed. Her eyes were heavy and closed almost as soon as she laid her head on the pillow. Something seemed to hover around her--the sound of a voice--the lull of a rhythm to which she had been listening for years past. It circled round her--indistinct, though she tried to snatch at it. It seemed to float by her and evade her. Her eyes closed, as she found her limbs resting after the day's toil; her mind became clearer. She listened. The voice came nearer: "Give me my robe: put on my crown; I have Immortal Longings in me . . ."

CHAPTER XIII

THE intense heat showed no signs of returning. The tornado had broken the summer. It was already fresher than it usually was for that time of year in the mornings, and as soon as the sun went down. Hannah found she needed a pullover when she first got up and went over to the kitchen. But the mornings were grand, she thought, the sun rising and lighting on the hill at the back : the sound of the men getting up—whistling and singing, the air like champagne. To get a glimpse of Dawson before they went off for the day was all she asked to help her get through the day's work. He was usually the last to appear at the breakfast table and when Hannah found that he was so, nearly every morning, she kept back his breakfast or cooked it separately and with more care than she did for the others. Riley came in a moment or two before Dawson and Hannah attended to him with almost as much care as she did Dawson, partly because she liked him and because she did not want him to think she might have come out to the camp for Dawson's sake. The men were good to her, paying her liberally for the

extras she did for them. She knew she was saving them money, in the long run, by looking after their things, as they would not have to buy a new lot or go without, as the case might be, when the camp finished, if their things were in better condition than they would have been but for her care of them.

Twice, Pearson had brought her in letters from Duncan and she had sent him a letter, also taken by Pearson, to be left at the Athabasca. She told him what she was doing and that he needn't worry as she was not only looking after herself but was being looked after. She spoke of Riley, old enough to be her grandfather, but not seeming so, and said he kept an eye on her all the time. The pay had tempted her. She hoped to see him later in the Fall. The mail came in three times a week with the stores. Dawson had always a large consignment of papers once a week sent to him which he distributed amongst the other men, and since Hannah had come to the camp, a *Woman's Home Journal* and *Maclean's*. She thought: He certainly has thought for others even if he does seem to think of himself as well! She had discovered that the bags of Bull Durham had been for Taylor, to make up to him for having been deprived of his job, she supposed.

While she was working with Taylor during the morning, he often spoke of Dawson and discussed

what he considered his queerness. His moods for instance : one never knew how to take him, but on the whole there weren't many spots on him, and even if he was a remittance man he knew how to share and look after anybody that was down and out. He told her of the licking he had given Pringle a short while before she had come out to the camp. Pringle had staged a fight between a trapped badger and the camp collie. He'd seen hell let loose a hundred times in every darned corner of the country but he'd never seen anything to equal that fight, no, sir. As Taylor told her about it he ceased cleaning the lamp and his eyes opened as though he was still watching it. Riley didn't happen to be on the spot, but Dawson heard it from his shack and came out. By Jingo—Taylor was chuckling—if he didn't pull that badger away as though it was a rasher out of the frying-pan, and wasn't Pringle mad. If he could get a knife into Dawson he would. If Dawson had given Pringle the satisfaction of a fight he mightn't have minded, even though he wouldn't have stood being licked with a good grace, but it was knowing pretty well that Dawson *could* lick him and didn't offer to that made Pringle more ready to hate him.

One evening when the mail had come in, they all sat round the shack reading their various letters and the magazines which Dawson had unwrapped and

put on the table. Hannah sat as usual on the step, though by now it was dark and she could hardly see to read the magazine which she had in front of her. Dawson sat near her reading a long letter, frowning every now and again as though puzzled or displeased. She turned the pages of *Macleans Magazine*, looking at the advertisements which she liked almost as much as the rest. She liked the illustrations. They brought her the same thrill as the Movies. The people in them were so far removed from anyone she had met or was likely to meet, for that matter. Dandy-looking couples : girls her own age dressed in gowns that made her feel, perhaps, if she ever got a chance of putting one on she mightn't look so bad, seeing how different she had looked as soon as she had put on the things she had bought in Redcliff. She looked up conscious that Dawson had his eyes on her. After reading their mail Pringle and Hull had gone off to their tents. Dawson was folding the letter which he had been frowning over and put it in his pocket. The other three had started poker as usual. Dawson stood up and held out his hand to Hannah. She caught hold of it and got up from sitting on the step. They strolled over to his shack. The gleam of the lamp lit in the dining-shack seemed to follow them. Dawson switched on the electric torch. The door

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swung back. She sat on the bed. After he had lit a cigarette he took out the letter which had come by the mail. He handed her a snapshot out of it. She took it from him and looked at it. It showed a long avenue of trees and at the end a bit of a house, a door and a window almost the same size as the door. That was as much as the snapshot showed. Dawson handed her another of the front of the same house. There were six long windows on the ground floor ; above them six more, a little smaller, and above them six more, half the size. In the foreground there was a lawn. On the left of the house there was an addition, unlike the rest of the building. The roof was lower and the windows smaller. Hannah said, still looking at the snapshot, " My ! That's a dandy hotel."

He laughed. " It happens to be my home."

" Your home ! And you out on a survey camp : I reckon you're crazy."

" I don't mean it's actually mine : my people live there. My eldest brother as well, his wife, and occasionally my sister. It's the brother I told you about—the youngest one was killed the last week of the war. Nugent was shell-shocked and gassed. They have a ghastly time with him. As a matter of fact he can't go on for very much longer, though he's always making marvellous recoveries."

"I reckon," she said again, "you're crazy to come out here."

"I used to go down for week-ends. I just *had* to get away."

She looked at him, a little fearful. "You didn't do anything wrong?"

He smiled amusedly: "No, I'd been knocking my head against a brick wall and felt I had to get somewhere where there was plenty of space. I've always been keen on surveying. When I was a kid I used to trapse miles round the estate with the Agent—he went, after the war. More than half the house is shut up. If Nugent ever does come into the place I don't mind betting he'll sell it. I'd like to make a pile out here, though that's not very likely, or marry an heiress, so if it ever came into the market I could buy it. I'd rather it was blown to bits than sold." He handed her another snapshot. "That's Nobbie, our old nurse, a perfectly priceless person."

An old woman in a black dress, a white cap and apron, standing in a doorway screwing up her eyes on account of the glare from the sun, and he called her a perfectly priceless person. Hannah tilted her head back and looked up at him. "You said good-bye to her as well."

He nodded. "Had to."

"For why?"

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“Nugent’s wife.”

“Didn’t you like her?”

“Too much.”

The door was open and the breeze blowing in made her shiver suddenly. Dawson took the snapshots out of her hand and put them back in the envelope. “You’re tired,” he said, “you’d better turn in. You ought to let Taylor do more than he does. I could kick myself sometimes for having brought you out here.”

“My! whatever for? and I’m sure grateful to you.”

He began to smile at her, but something in her eyes made him suddenly turn away. He switched off the torch and pulled her up from the bed. They crossed over to the dining-shack and she called out good-night as she always did. Something was choking her as she listened to Riley’s “Good-night, Ma’am, I hope you sleep well.”

As she crossed over to her shack she realised in what a short time they might be leaving the camp. If the weather broke up suddenly, as it did some years, and the cold weather started, they would pack up and go into the town: the men would find quarters elsewhere. When she had shut her door she knelt down at the side of her bed and looked through the window at the sky which was ablaze with stars. She closed her eyes, and for a moment

experienced an overwhelming desire to be back in Evelyn Dawson's shack sitting on the side of his bed. She could not think of herself as separated from him—left alone, perhaps in Redcliff, hoping to find work at all costs. There might not be any to find, for the folks, she knew, were economising in every way they could, and winter was not the best time for her to hope she would find work. But it was not the thought of being unable to find work that was actually affecting her optimism, but the idea of parting with Dawson. She could not hope to follow him where he might choose to go when the camp broke up. There was the difference between him and the others. Where she might hold out her hand to them, it seemed his place to hold out his hand to her. She was between the two and suited to neither. But it wouldn't do to think that : she must get a hold of herself or what wouldn't happen in the future? If there was only someone to whom she might turn when in difficulty ; but even if there was, no one could get her what she felt was beyond her reach. She would have to go on taking what came her way, and not mind whether it was not what she wanted.

In his shack Dawson sat on his bed, a writing pad balanced on his knee. He had written a few lines and was reading them through. "My dear Lois. In a way I wish you had not written——"

CHAPTER XIV

As they were leaving the following morning Dawson told her that they were returning early as it was the last day they would be going so far from the camp. He suggested they should ride together to the lake after supper. There would be a moon about nine o'clock. He'd see that they weren't home too late.

Hannah said : " That'll be fine, Taylor'll see to things, he's always real kind." She smiled at him and for the rest of the day went about her work with a light heart. Pearson had been off colour the day before and had not gone with the others. She had meant to go in to him to see that his temperature had gone down since the night before, but Dawson telling her about the ride had put Pearson out of her mind. Making one of the beds she heard his violin. She had been shaking a pillow outside Hull's tent : she threw it on to the camp bed and went into Pearson's tent. " Well," she said, " if I hadn't forgotten all about the sick kid, would you believe it ? "

" Don't mention it—I'm used to it."

" Used to what ? "

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“ Being forgotten.”

“ Shucks, that ain’t true. You getta mail that’s as heavy as most.”

“ Mail ! That don’t count.”

He was rubbing his thumb over the strings of his violin making a soft humming sound. Hannah felt his wrist. “ You’re cool now. I reckon if you don’t think more about your mail than that you might as well save your folks the trouble of writing. ’Tisn’t everybody’s got folks to write to them.”

“ You’ve got something that I haven’t got.”

“ Is that so ? I’d like to know what it is ; seems to me that I ain’t got much if you ask me.”

“ You’ve got Dawson.”

She stared at him. “ My ! ” she said, “ ain’t you jest batty.”

“ It isn’t my fault if I am.”

“ I mean—batty to say a thing like that. I mend Evelyn Dawson’s socks and he knows it. You know’s well’s I do a man don’t think anything of a girl that chores for him, no, sir.”

“ You took him from me : since you came out to the camp he doesn’t look at me.”

Hannah sat on the edge of his bed.

“ Say, what kind of an idea have you gotten hold of.”

“ I’d go to hell for Dawson.”

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Hannah went on : “ He was after somebody who could cook decent kinder food, and I was after work that brought me enough to save a bit for the winter, and though it’s not supposed to be a woman’s job to come right out to a survey camp I reckon it’s what’s wanted. Men think they can look after themselves, and perhaps they can, but a bunch of men stuck on the Prairie without a woman to look after them—it ain’t natural.”

She was looking at him, puzzled and yet sub-consciously reading the solution in his troubled eyes. Their plaintive hunger, and his young full lips set together as though with endurance as some of the older men’s were. She had always heard of the rough time the women got out in the West, but she reckoned the men needed a word said for them as well. Men were like children—they went down under easy as anything, unless they were kept up. A few words, maybe, was enough, or a look, to let them know they had to keep right on or get shoved down a way they oughtn’t to go. She thought of Duncan and his unfilled need of understanding when he should have had pretty well all he wanted, anyway enough, to stop him from keeping girls like Edie Brown up his sleeve. But there was Mrs Duncan always at the door skinning the Prairie with her ageing eyes because Duncan had taken a

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day off to go into the town, watching for him to get back when, if she had a bitta gumption he'd take good care to run home like a gopher into its hole.

She looked at Pearson. "Punk," she said, "you done your third year of science ; you gotta dandy home down east, maybe—"

"Sure, I know—"

"You're only a kid : surely to Goodness you can look up to a man like Evelyn Dawson without slobbering about it. Anyways, he ain't a slobberer—" She caught her breath, suddenly aware that she was speaking of him to someone for the first time.

Pearson looked up.

"That's a cinch," he said, and then : "I guess you're mighty wise for a kid."

"I haven't learnt much, but I reckon on the Prairie we learn it underneath so's when your eyes are opened you see a whole lot you didn't know was there."

"Where do you go," he asked, "when this show's finished ?"

"Ask me ?"

"You let me know and if you're ever up against it—"

"Thanks, Punk, I will, maybe I'll go east, though times are as bad there as anywhere. I reckon

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you'll want a bit of lunch when Taylor and Rickman have theirs. And don't you go fretting and getting a fever, there's other ways of showing folks you care for them, 'sides that."

As soon as she told Taylor she was riding to the lake with Dawson he told her to make off as he would finish whatever had to be done. She changed into her breeches which, once dried, had not been as ruined as she thought they might have been: her boots she had rubbed grease into and the stiffness had worn off. In the shirtwaist, washed and ironed, she looked as she had when she had taken her leave from the Duncans' farm. Dawson was waiting outside her shack with Boyce's pony which he had told Hannah she might have if she ever wanted to ride. She soon mounted and had Dawson riding beside her at a slow canter.

The sky was light behind them where the sun had set: in front of them the moon was already rising: without it the stars alone would have given them sufficient light. As it rose, the lake caught its reflection even that distance away and shone like a magnified jewel. The ground was flat and fairly smooth. The air was fresh and blew on their faces. Hannah wore no hat and had tucked her hair behind her ears. When they had left the camp about two

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miles behind them they walked their horses. For a while Dawson was silent. Hannah had no wish to break the silence, for should he never suggest again coming for this ride it would seem to last longer, riding like this, a silence between them.

She was reminded of her last ride with Duncan. She wondered if he had felt for her a little of what she now felt for Dawson : whether he had experienced as much hopelessness and hope all in one moment. The possibility of the impossible. Blinded, yet holding on to the security of vision. If she could take from him anything of what she was suffering herself, when she lay in her bed, the candle blown out and her face pressed into the pillow, she would willingly do so and bear the extra burden for being the cause of it. She would not wish anyone to suffer the pain of love for her sake, neither would she part with any of the ecstasy. But where did it begin and how could one distinguish between love and pain ? Was what she felt a mixture of the two or the denial of love alone ?

She was suddenly conscious of Dawson riding very close to her. The Prairie was flooded with the moonlight. As the moon shone on the water the shores seemed to have a greater distance between them. Presently Dawson said : " It doesn't really make much difference where you are, though the

knowledge of being in a certain place you think is giving you the satisfaction you are feeling at the time, and I suppose atmosphere has a lot to do with it ; but I'm sure one can create the space that you wish to surround you, almost anywhere."

He took hold of her arm and held it tightly in his grasp. " I'm talking incomprehensible nonsense. If I do it again, just hit me over the head."

" Seems to me you're getting kinder homesick ; I've often noticed that."

" I think you're mistaken, honestly, I don't think I am."

" Well, I've said all along you were crazy to be out in this kinder place."

" But that was what I was gassing about—it doesn't matter so much about the place—I don't know it."

He left off laughing and let go her arm. They rode on in silence for a while. They came near the lake and he told her they had to branch round to the right of it as it was marshy on the near side. The further side there was a plantation reaching as far as the water. They rode round cautiously until the ground became firmer, reaching presently a slope where the ground was dry. Here and there were bushes with an occasional sapling growing in the middle of a thicket. Dawson did not attempt to

dismount for a moment but waited there, Hannah by his side. Every now and again a breeze swept round the lake and fanned their faces then died down again. More coyotes barked than nearer the camp, breaking the silence, answering each other for miles around. At last Dawson dismounted and when Hannah had done the same he took her bridle and led the two horses over to a group of bushes and tethered them to one of the saplings. He returned to Hannah and taking her hand he walked for about twenty yards along the slope. Presently he stopped and gazed over the surface of the lake. Then he sat down pulling Hannah down beside him. She shivered a little though the air was not cold and Dawson's hand had warmed hers through while he had hold of it. He laid flat with his head resting on a tuft of prairie grass. She looked down on him. He was lying there gazing across the lake as though he was unconscious of her presence. Her eyes followed his. The trees on the other side were reflected in the water and made a deep dark edging at the lake. A curlew cried a little distance away. Quite suddenly Dawson rolled over and buried his head in Hannah's lap. The next moment she heard him give a long, dry sob. It startled her, but immediately, as though she sensed an adequate reason for his grief, she laid one hand on his head and with

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the other held his arm against her. For some minutes he did not move but laid there, every now and again giving terrible sobs, making her choke back tears that were brimming fast under her eyelids. Presently he stopped, lying perfectly still, she stroking his head and gently rubbing her hand on his sleeve. Without speaking he put his hand up and took hold of hers and held it for a little while. Then he said :

“ Sorry ! I’ve only done that once before ; my second month at the Front. I was nineteen. We were up on a hill, there was a village below—the usual narrow street with the cottages each side. Suddenly it started filling up. They swarmed into it, blocking the whole street. We turned the machine guns on them. It was like mowing down hay at a distance. They went down in bunches till there wasn’t one left. Then we went down. They were all kids : the eldest about sixteen. There were some that might have been about twelve. I happened to be with the Colonel. There was a cottage door open ; we went into it to get away from them. Before we knew what we were doing we were sitting one each side of a table howling for all we were worth. I’ve never forgotten it.”

He laid still again, allowing her to go on stroking

his head. Presently he said : “ You’re rather a wonder, aren’t you ? ”

“ There ain’t a reason for saying that, as far as I can see.”

She tried to make it sound as though she was smiling, but her voice trembled and he looked up. The tears she had tried to keep back were falling down her cheeks, just slowly, for she had managed, when she spoke, to check any more from coming under her lids. He suddenly felt himself trembling. He took up her hand and looked at it, realising that her touch had conveyed boundless sympathy and understanding to him. A woman with griefs of a lifetime could not have sat there so silently, adequately giving what she had given. And she was only a child. However much she needed sympathy herself there was no one to give it to her, for, from what she had told him, she belonged to no one and no one belonged to her. She was just nobody ; she didn’t count. But he knew of no one who could have relieved him of the burden which, for some indescribable reason, he had been stifling for months past. The visits to Jefferson’s had revolted him, and yet he had kept up the pretence that they had helped him to forget things which he didn’t wish to remember. He had allowed himself to come down to the level of men like Pringle, who weren’t fit for

a decent man's society, let alone a woman's. He had brought this girl out to work for and wait on such a man without any hesitation—without thinking twice about it. He had allowed Pringle to stand near her and talk to her, only ousting him from his place to show his own superiority, and admitting to himself that, without wishing for any favour from her, he was jealous of another man monopolising her.

He sat up still keeping hold of her hand. It lay in his, cool and trembling. He realised that his was trembling as well. He looked down at her hand not wishing to meet her eyes.

"You know," he said, "I ought to be shot for bringing you out to this camp. I'm going to send you back."

A moment before she had felt as though flood-gates had opened in her heart, but with his words they clapped together again, making her sway towards him. She put her hand to her throat as though her action would steady her. He tightened the hold on the hand which he held in his, and looked at her, being unable to keep his eyes away from her any longer. She made an effort to speak. "There's nowhere I could go if you did. I reckon I'd stay at the camp till I died s'long as you were there."

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He waited a moment. He couldn't let her go, but what on earth was he to do? She was trembling violently, and yet he felt she was making an overwhelming effort to keep control of herself. She had given her strength to him when he had sobbed out his grief in her lap and had not realised it. She seemed to cry suddenly to him and so he put his arm round her and held her to him. He kissed her a little leisurely at first, as though he were still undecided whether to cross a border which would once and for all carry him past a danger mark of which he had been aware for a long time past. But soon he was caught in the torrent of her passion, for though she was lying unresistingly in his arms, her eyes, looking into his, gave more than he had ever been given by any other woman before. "Gretel," he said softly, "Gretel." Her eyes had closed now and he gave her a little shake as though he was impatient. "Gretel, look at me."

She opened her eyes and looked up into his. He had been considering himself the last few weeks, allowing himself a little of her companionship to liven the hours that otherwise would be without interest. It was extraordinary that she had fallen into his moods and appreciated them in turn, listened intelligently to his reading of poetry in the evenings by the light of his electric torch or the

moon, as it shone through the window of his shack. It had been just enough to keep him, not amused, but sane, for it needed sanity to live in a camp for months on end with a certain hopelessness gnawing away at your reason; mental guts—call it anything you like. He had been saving himself the degradation and cost of visits to Jeffersons at the expense of taking from this child all that she had to give. Her affection and care and purity of soul had protected him from a tortured conscience, and she had given him a companionship that could hardly have been equalled. He was paying her fifteen dollars a month for it. Three pounds. About as much as his mother paid an under-housemaid at home. By rights, she should be sheltered, loved, protected, for there was nothing to be found in her nature but refinement and fastidiousness. The queer, quiet reserve, mixed with the little backhanders given with a cowpuncher's slang, was merely courage controlled with a childish strength of her own. This start in life, for which she was grateful to him, was really only a drawback. If she turned up at any of the towns round about in order to get work for the winter, she was likely to run into a man like Pringle who would not keep it to himself where he had met her before. In spite of what one heard and saw in the West, on the whole they were a narrow-

minded lot. The place was teeming with Methodist hypocrites who, in the end, might drive her to a place like Jeffersons. He knew he was ready to pay any price rather than be responsible for that happening. If he went home for the winter he would be wondering all the time what was happening to her. She had a strange attraction ; quite unconsciously she had created havoc with the men in the camp. Even Riley, treble her age, would fight any of them for the possession of her. Pringle's facetiousness had once moved in the direction of an unsavoury remark and Riley, keeping his eyes fixed on Pringle's, moved his hand slowly round to his hip and rested it on the Colt in its leathered case. She had gradually dropped a lot of the slang she had used when Dawson had first met her. She had picked up little phrases which he constantly used, nodding sometimes at him while she tried to find words which would sound less a corruption of his own speech.

He was thinking of these things while she was lying there in his arms looking up at him, her whole soul pervading the atmosphere around them. He felt it and suddenly drew in his breath, awed, as he had once felt in the presence of death. He held her close up against him. After a moment she sighed. He whispered : " Gretel, don't worry. I'll look after you, always, do you hear ? "

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It was a relief to have crossed the barrier at last. He knew that the moment when he had kissed her would count more than any other in his whole life. Perhaps it was true that a desire long waited for did not suffice when attained as much as something given and taken all in one moment. The moment did not lose as much in its passing but somehow gathered strength with a promise to return again. He felt no regret for his sudden avowal. Instead, an alleviation from what had seemed to make his life unbearable for a considerable time. Already his brother's wife seemed to have been moved a distance away. Here was Gretel in his arms: he was crushing her every now and again against him, hardly taking his lips off hers except when he drew them across her forehead, over her eyelids, down her cheek and then back to her lips again. Her heart was beating—he felt it against his own. Her existence was for him alone. No one knew they were there. This hour could never return again however many they spent together for the rest of their lives. And yet he had a desire to return to the camp and see her safely in her shack and close the door on her. He told her so and she seemed to understand. “It wouldn't do to be late back,” he told her, “and there's lots of time—to-morrow, and after to-morrow heaps of to-morrows.”

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“ Sure.”

“ I’ll tell the others in the morning. You’re not to go on doing the work : I’ll see that Taylor does it. It won’t be long now before we get into town with any luck.”

CHAPTER XV

SHE could not tell when the change in herself actually began, any more than she knew exactly what Evelyn Dawson felt towards her from the time they left the camp. It seemed as though Fate was batting her like a ball in too swift a game, to a finish where victory had threatened to elude her from the beginning. Sometimes she felt that if she remained herself and remembered, instead of trying to forget, that she had once been Hannah McCleod, she was more likely to combat the feeling of inferiority which constantly dismayed her. The only thing she could be certain of was her love for Dawson. She was not the same girl he had met at Jeffersons, or that he had taken out to the camp. She was not the same girl who had worked away and who had tried to imagine the future without him. By marrying her he had accomplished the change in her or rather the change she imagined had taken place. Though he had not changed himself, he appeared to her as a different person because he thought of her as different to the girl he had rescued and given a start in a new life, though that start had

been questionable. A man in Duncan's position, with a wife and a certain amount of prestige in that part of the country, had not made her feel as she had felt with Dawson, the moment she had set eyes on him. She tried to think that her sensitiveness was due to her overwhelming love for him, which had too great a mixture of gratitude mixed up along with it. Dawson loved her, and if Hannah had only known, it was only occasionally when he thought of his return home that his mouth twisted with a faint apprehension at a possible dilemma. His actions had always been criticised. If he had turned up at any time and announced his engagement to a girl they did not already know, his choice would have been turned over and prodded with opinions, until he would have been left wondering whether his game was worth any candle. He realised, for other people told him, that such prodings are the outcome of affection. It was the way a family showed their concern as to one's possible happiness.

His brother Nugent had been always the golden calf of the family, set up and worshipped by one and all. His youngest brother, Henry, who had been lost in the Battle of Jutland, had come in for the adoration which is invariably given to the youngest of the family. His sister, Erica, rather

aloof and getting her own way, whether the older ones liked it or not, would probably befriend Hannah and tell the rest of the family, for God's sake, what did it matter to any of them who Lyn married. Without any of them at Sherwood he could imagine great happiness in showing Hannah every yard of the place for which he had such affection. She would soon get acclimatised. As she broke herself of cowpuncher's slang, something seemed to return to her she was vaguely conscious of, and which sometimes surprised Dawson. She was conscious, when she thought of Duncan and any of the others at Two Creeks, of a guilty betrayal. They had been her friends, and once she had lost Steve she had wanted to evade all that they stood for, and search for something for which she had only an instinctive yearning. To her relief Dawson depended on her companionship as much as he had done when they had been together at the camp. He was subject, wherever he was, to the same moods and she had learned to understand them more the longer she was with him. He would, at most times, make up to her wholeheartedly for any words or suppositions that might have caused her any concern. He found it more difficult to talk about his people when it came to describing each of them as she might find them. She would literally never

have met anyone like them before. The like or dislike might be mutual. He talked of their possible return first when his father had written disquieting reports of Nugent's health and behaviour, which seemed to become more and more abnormal. Possibly the worst thing which could have happened to him was his return to Sherwood, where so many showed their concern for him and did little but increase the terrible introspection which gnawed him mentally most of the time. Lois had had breakdowns and had occasionally to go off to rest homes. They wrote that they were anxious to see Evelyn's wife. He could quite believe it. His mother had aged, his father said, this last year; she kept saying that she wished Evelyn would come home. Nobbie wrote him a little letter to wish him happiness. He would like Nobbie to meet Hannah. It was Nobbie's letter which almost compelled him to write and say that as there would be nothing doing all the winter in their part of the world, he would return.

But before he did such a thing he must explain to Hannah—he always called her Gretel—that they must agree as to what could be said about her. He apologised, laughingly, for having to take her to a country where you couldn't admit having been picked up by a half-breed and brought up in a

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shack by him, and who, dying, left you with a five-dollar grip and precious little to put inside it. He tilted her chin up as he told her this and announced cheerfully : “ I shall tell one glorious white lie and bear all responsibility for any you have to tell them. It’s difficult to explain but you see --Nugent and his wife will never have children, so ours, if we have any, will be the heirs : anyway, that fact makes me crow with delight —and such a lot is thought of the predecessors on the other side of a family who gets linked up with ours. In a way, bunkum, especially in these days, but the last generation have always lived in a rut and can’t change their ideas.”

Hannah said : “ I don’t see what anybody’s got to worry over another for, you can’t grow up stuck on somebody else’s fork. Strikes me, you’re best out here.”

“ I am in heaps of ways but there’s the winter to get through.”

Sherwood came into his mind. The avenue up to the house would have golden lines in the ditches fallen from the elms overhead. The small gardens in front of the lodge gates would be filled with Chrysanthemums. At the end of the lawn behind the Bay hedges, mounds of leaves would be smouldering, the smoke visible from the windows of the house. He liked looking up at the nursery, or what

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had been the nursery windows at the west side, the iron bars still across them, waiting for future Dawsons to glance through as they all had done, Nobbie clasping them round their middles though there was not the least danger of them falling out. The chimes of the grandfather clock in the hall—he could hear them if he listened for them—deep and slow. His return there after the war, too sickened to remain in the regiment, which had been such a cause for argument. The hope of his father “putting him into something, he didn’t mind what.” Nugent’s return from the Home and Lois having to live too at Sherwood because there seemed no alternative. His eventually working in the City and returning home for week-ends because of his love for Sherwood. The gradual infatuation for Lois and the intolerable temptation to return to Sherwood in order to be near her, every week-end. She had written to him occasionally against his wishes, for her letters only renewed the ache in his heart and for Sherwood as well.

But Hannah had eased both. It was her easy appreciation of things which counted to him that bound them together as much as anything. They had taken a furnished bungalow on the hill in Red-cliff belonging to some people who were on a visit to the old country. Trunks of Dawson’s which had

been in store were taken out, and Hannah had unpacked the remainder of his books. She seldom went down town and always hoped Dawson might consider going east. She had written to the Duncans and told them of her marriage and asked them to come and see her if they were in the town. She did not wish to enter into the social life of the town : she preferred those whom she had known on the Prairie, rough though some of them might be, to the people in the town who had risen from something rougher and thought they could deny it with a thin varnishing of etiquette. Any who had known her a few months back would say that she was using the same varnish to alter herself from the girl who had lived with Steve Sanderson and who had been thankful for his protection. But she could deny this. She had not been what they had thought her, she was positive of that, and yet she knew she was not the girl she was now meant to be. In finding Dawson she had not found herself, but he had found something for her, something which, before, she had lacked. Whenever she was left alone in the bungalow, a silence or a sunset would bring an elevation of spirit which she thought was carrying her close to the consummation of content ; but there was something which escaped her even when she was lying in Dawson's arms and which

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she felt must remain undiscovered till time should reveal it to her. Sometimes she felt a stranger to herself, yet unless she had permitted the change Dawson would have watched her and wondered why she "reckoned" so much. She read through his books, carefully studying phrases, saying them aloud so as to impress them on her memory. It brought back her appreciation she had had for Steve, and much of Shakespeare reminded her of Steve's reading of the Psalms—the philosophy of both explaining so eloquently the purpose of living.

Each individual was capable of cutting their life according to their pattern. The more intricate the pattern the greater need for careful cutting and the cutting should be for others' benefit, and so one's own pattern was eventually perfected. Once she had had the longing to return to Steve's grave and bring back the terror and at the same time the grandeur of that last night when he had lain on the ground under the pines and passed out uncomplainingly in an agony of pain. But she knew that she did not want to travel backwards, whatever memories she chose to keep in mind. There was one thing she wanted to do and that was to do all she could for Dawson in return for all he had done for her. She had faced the fact that he had married her out of pity, perhaps pity for

himself as well as for her. Terrible loneliness had completely overshadowed pride in either of them. She thought if he ever showed signs of regret she would admit that she guessed as much and ask him to realise that it could have been possible to regret another marriage equally, though contracted under different circumstances. He often said it seemed a long time to wait to join up on another survey camp, and ten to one he couldn't take her with him, and that the best thing was for them to get home, even for a few months. "I'd get them to let us have part of the east wing. It's been shut up for ages: we shouldn't see the others more than we wanted to. Shall we?"

"How'm I to say yes—maybe I'd be sorry."

"Maybe you wouldn't be." He laughed and put his arm round her and drew her head down on his shoulder. "I should take you on a tour of inspection until you loved every yard of turf and knew it all by heart. I should make you count the stones in the drive and the birch trees in the wood and the times the pigeons cooed before breakfast."

"Oh, gee——"

"And I should make you count them all over again each time you said that."

She was silent. Then said: "Supposing I say it home there?"

“ I don’t mind if you do—why shouldn’t you ? ”

She was silent again.

He tightened his arm round her. “ You know I said I was going to tell them one glorious white lie ? ”

“ Ah-ah.”

“ Do you think I meant it ? ”

“ You know better’n I do.”

“ I shall tell them the truth—that your parents died and that a friend of your father’s adopted you : that he lost his money in the slump, the place had to be sold and that I met you at a friend’s house, and finally that they’re damned lucky to have you as an addition to the family and that you’re perfectly priceless.”

She was still silent. He hugged her again.

“ Do you hear ? *absolutely* priceless.”

“ That’s a big word when you come to think of it.”

“ Not big enough for you.”

She turned and buried her face in his shoulder. They stayed still like statues, his arm round her fast, hardly daring to take their breath. When the wave of emotion passed, she said, her face pressed into his shoulder : “ There’s nothing I wouldn’t do for you, though, maybe, if you told me to quit—I couldn’t do that.”

“ Couldn’t you ? I’m not likely to ask you, am I ? ”

A letter came in December saying that Nugent was considerably worse and they would like Evelyn to return. There was nothing, they supposed, that need prevent him. Hannah found Dawson reading the letter when she brought the coffee in from the kitchen one morning, for breakfast. She poured him out a cup and placed the coffee-pot in front of the electric fire on the hearth. He laid the letter down and started eating, as he had promised to go down to meet the Mail from Winnipeg to see a man he knew pass through on his way to Vancouver. He looked across at Hannah.

“ We shall have to pack up,” he said. He looked out of the small casement window. “ Fancy seeing a good old fog after this snow and sun ! Unbelievable.” He smiled across at Hannah and she suddenly felt a quiver of excitement at the prospect of going across the sea, a thing she would have looked forward to a little more if it hadn’t been the prospect of meeting the Dawsons the other end of the journey.

Then he said : “ Poor old Nugent, damned hard lines—there was nothing he couldn’t have had in the old days for the asking. Everything seemed

to fall into his lap. As I shall be down at the depôt I'll find out about the sailings—there won't be too much of a crowd going this time of year."

Hannah said : " December ain't much of a month for travelling. It'll be rough, I guess."

" Not necessarily ; sometimes May is the worst month. It'll be cold, but unless you're out on deck you live in a fug for the whole solid week."

" That ain't much better than too much of a blow."

He looked across at her and laughed. " You'll survive." He laid the letter aside without having read any more of it and finished his breakfast. When he got up from the table he threw it over to Hannah and putting on his coat in the hall returned and kissed her. " We'll have great times," he said.

She lifted her face up for him to kiss her. " Sure," she smiled.

She watched him from the window as he went down the hill to the town. The ground, covered with snow, banked high each side of the sidewalk, sparkled like diamonds ; everything that went by sounded muffled and silent. With every step he took she seemed to follow him, wishing to bring him back again before he had gone too far away and—as he had said—found out about the sailings. She looked over the snow-covered Prairie in the direction

of Two Creeks and seemed to draw to her all that her past life had meant to her. She had fled from it but for this moment she wanted to hold it fast, for soon, whether she liked it or no, it would escape her for ever. She stood so still that she seemed to feel the wind blow through the storm windows; something, she could not tell what, chilled her and she shivered.

She returned to the electric-fire and sat in front of it, drinking her coffee. She reached up and took the letter which Dawson had thrown over to her and started to read it. "My Dearest Evelyn." It was from his mother, then. She still looked wonderingly at the crest in the centre of the paper as she had done the first time she had seen it. The last letter had been from his father: they took it in turns to write. "We were so glad to get your last letter and hear that you were both keeping well. Your father and I have both been having little ups and downs lately, perhaps it is no wonder. Sometimes I get really rather worried about him. I realise how he is 'getting on': you would notice the difference if you saw him. We should both like to see you home again. Of course we realise there is little to do unless you went back to the City, but things are worse there now than when you went away. But if you could come we should both

be very relieved. We trust that Gretel would soon settle down, though I daresay she would find it strange after her life in Canada." Here the page ended and Hannah got up to pour herself out another cup of coffee, then returned to the hearth. "Nugent is bad: his lungs seem more affected than they were. He so often wishes you were here. Lois has been away a good deal. One must sympathise with her, but if I were in her place I think I should consider Nugent a little more than she does, whatever it cost me in health. If only they had had a child before it had all happened. It would make all the difference to us. We have had to let Collins go at last, we simply could not afford to keep him. Your father felt it very much, having to part with him after all these years. We wish you had married someone who could have given a more intelligible account of their antecedents."

She had come to the end of the second page. She took a deep breath. Gee, what a thing to write and before they had seen her. She shivered again and felt as though she wanted to draw Dawson back to her before he got as far as the dépôt. She didn't want to read any more. Evelyn wouldn't have let her read it if he had read it through himself first. He would have made some excuse. Was there anything else she ought to know which,

for Evelyn's sake, would be better for her to know ?

She held the letter up and turned over another page. " Perhaps it would have been better if we had written sooner and let you know how much worse Nugent is but it is too late now. / We only hope that there was no reason why you should have had to decide so suddenly to get married. I wonder—if you should regret having done so—if the facilities for divorce are much the same as in America. You may think it is unlike me to hint at such a thing, for such a thing is against my principles : I am merely thinking of those who may one day inherit Sherwood."

She did not read any further. She wondered for a moment what excuse Evelyn might have made to prevent her from reading this letter. She could not imagine him arriving home revelling in any sort of home-coming, knowing how they felt towards her. She hadn't wanted to stay in Redcliff but now she felt she would give anything to remain there for the rest of her life. The little thrill she had felt when Evelyn had first mentioned that they might be going across to the old country, left her. She had wanted to see the place he loved so and learn to love it too. After a while it would seem

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as much home with him there beside her as anywhere out here. He had been wonderful in the way he had made her feel that she would be at home there. She had sometimes felt that he felt afraid of something that lay ahead and it was no wonder, if his people were capable of thinking the kind of things that were in the letter. Once he had said that his return would mean more to him having Hannah with him than if he returned alone. He explained that the thrill of returning, even as a boy, had always fallen a bit flat at the actual moment of arrival, he could not explain why. There had seemed to be something missing, like the dumb note of a piano missed out in a scale. Perhaps it had been that more often than not he had arrived with Nugent and embraces had seemed a bit stale by the time they came round to him. He could not have told her anything that could have given her greater assurance than that, surely. To think that he wanted her by his side when he stood once again in the house where he had been born—she, an entire stranger, in a sort of a way and not even his own kind, bringing him a certainty in a moment when one might imagine he could forget her surrounded with others who had waited for his arrival. But he hadn't read this letter.

It was time she forgot about it. There were a heaper things to do. She felt as if she wanted to re-assert herself—feel the independence which had developed in her so soon after Steve's death when she had had the determination to refuse Duncan's invitation to stay on with them at their farm. With what certainty she had told them she could look after herself. How easy it had seemed to think that a few months on a survey camp would give her a start for the rest of the winter. Nothing quite so miraculous could have been imagined by her or anyone else as the fact of her meeting and marrying a man like Evelyn Dawson.

She wondered what they would all say if she took out the snapshots of Sherwood and told them that one day she would be mistress there and was already part and parcel of it and the likely mother of its future heirs. What did it matter whether Evelyn's folks took to her or not? She counted to him more perhaps, than if he had hung about her for months than the way in which he had claimed her through pity and emotion, and prompted by his own loneliness. She tried to stifle the recollection of the way he had said—when he had first mentioned Nugent's wife—"too much." He had loved—and she sometimes thought—still loved Lois Dawson "too much." To think of him parted from herself,

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with no rightful claim on her, loving her thousands of miles away, "too much" made her realise the unfulfilment of her marriage. It was something she could never claim from him however good he was to her, whatever his consideration and loyalty. That ineffable longing for the unattainable would always be hers, however much she gave to him. In fact, she was wise enough to know that the more she gave to him the farther away would float her chance of attaining what, she herself, desired. But that wouldn't matter for now. He seemed happy, and not with the assuagement of passion but with a kind of true content. They were early days she knew, for making a boast that they had had no disagreements, but there had been opportunities for storms and she had taken them as a means to smooth his own tempestuous nature. To suffer as she did at those times and afterwards to be told by him that she was "rather a wonder," brought her the greatest tribute that she might ever get from him. If it was going to cost her something to face this family of his who wished she could give a more intelligible account of their antecedents, she'd face them and let them know that antecedents as far as she was concerned didn't make so very much difference. She reckoned there wasn't too much wrong with

her and the sooner she let them know it, the better.

She wasn't going to stay there and think about it any more. She would get on with what had to be done before Dawson came back. It was a pleasure to look after a home like this, even though it didn't belong to them. There were enough of Evelyn's things about to make it seem as though it was their home. He had bought her things of which any woman might be proud. He might come back at any minute after the Mail had gone on its way and tell her that they must start packing right away. She would feel glad for his sake because it meant so much to him. And whatever his family held out to her—a warm hand or a cool hand—she wouldn't let him see that she minded if it was the latter. She went into the bedroom intending to tidy things away by the time Evelyn returned. How queer it would seem not to have the Prairie for ever in view, after all one's life. Even if it was as ugly as some folks made out it had a kinder way of gripping hold of you and making you choke at the idea of leaving it. But she guessed it didn't have that effect on people like Evelyn that had come out from a place like his. He had the feeling for that—something more than a feeling she thought—as much as she

had ever had for the only home she had ever known.

Later, when he returned, she saw him through the window and ran to open the door to him. He had arranged something that seemed good to him, she was sure of that as she looked up into his face. He went straight in to the fire and held out his hands to warm them through. He knelt down on one knee and looked round at her as she stood by him. "I saw Corrie: he's broke to the wide and is thinking of joining the N.F.W.P."

"They don't take fellows 'cause they're broke to the wide, no, sir, they've got to have better recommendation than that, believe me."

"They couldn't find a better man—only I can't quite imagine him——" He turned the backs of his hands round to the heat. She saw his fingers red and a little swollen from the cold: his signet-ring looked tight. He looked back at her again: "I've booked two berths for the twenty-second."

There was a light in his eyes and he was smiling. She felt a choking in her throat and a desire to speak at the same time. But no word came from her, only the impulse to bend down and hold his head against her as though she would never let him go. He returned from the fire and put his arms round her and let his head rest where she

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held it. After a moment she said: "I'm glad——"

"It means an awful lot."

"Don't I know that—my dear, don't I jest know that—nothing here in the world for you to do and not the kinder folks you should be meeting—not the kinder wife you ought to have——"

His movement was so sudden that he nearly threw her over. He seemed to spring from the ground and pull her into his arms before she knew what he was doing. If he had not seen her or, indeed, any other woman for months past he could not have more savagely brought his lips down on hers. He kissed her as though some exasperation had driven him insane. She laid impassive in his arms. His arms round her body crushed her and hurt her. She felt he must know what pain he was inflicting on her. She tried to cry out to him but his mouth covered hers and she could not move, he held her so closely against him. Quite suddenly he buried his face in her breast, his hold loosened on her and she was able to lift her arms and hold his head in her hands.

After a moment he said: "No one could understand as you do."

She said: "'Tisn't understanding—I reckon—it's jest love and even if I give you all I've got, it don't seem enough."

“Don’t say that.”

“It’s true—what can I give *you*—nothing that’s much.”

“Don’t talk absolute nonsense. You’re asking for another demonstration.” He tightened his arms for a moment.

“That ain’t true. Do you know what I was thinking the other day—that we’d been mighty sensible for a couple that’s jest married—more content with what counts—being good friends and not going to hell about nothing.”

He laughed. “What a description of a perfectly good honeymoon : have you been taking it down in shorthand ? ”

She looked at him seriously : “I don’t need any shorthand or longhand for that matter, to remember what it’s been like, you know that.”

“How should I know ? Don’t you want to know the name of the boat we’re going on ? ”

“I reckon I’ll know that soon enough.”

“Don’t you want to go ? ”

“’Course I do—but the sea will scare me stiff.”

“You’ll think it’s quite the grandest sight you ever saw. The Atlantic in a storm—whoopee.”

He laughed and she laughed with him. He seemed in a happier frame of mind than she had seen him in before. If the cause of it robbed her of all the

happiness he had given to her she felt she wouldn't mind, but there was really no reason why it should. She was—in spite of her marriage to him—still Hannah McCleod, who had seen, in the last few months a deal of life and had stood up to it as well as anyone else might have done. All the antecedents in the world couldn't have helped her what she had helped herself through. There was nothing much for her to have struggled out of the river for that time she had fallen in, but she hadn't allowed herself to quit, though she might easily have felt that life ahead was a bit too stiff to face with nothing left in the world but a pair of sodden breeches and boots that weighed her feet down enough to carry her to the bottom.

The moment Dawson recollected the letter he had left unread, he looked round for it. Hannah went out of the room. She wondered whether she should profess ignorance as to what it contained and so relieve him of awkwardness or tell him that she had read it and the only thing was, for her to do her utmost to remedy any wrong she had done him by marrying him. The parents who were unknown to her might be a sight better than the parents of some of the girls in America who married Englishmen on account of their titles. She started to sing, imagining him reading the letter and the

hurt he might think it would cause her if she had read it. He shouldn't worry. It wouldn't do for the two of them to know his mother could hint that Evelyn might get rid of her if he thought twice about it. If his loyalty to her was only on the surface—the letter might make him wonder. But she wouldn't think of that.

She sang while she tidied away the things in the bedroom : all he had to do was to put the letter away in his pocket and tear it up later when she was nowhere around. She wondered whether he had finished reading it. If she stayed out of the room he might guess : the best thing was to call him into her and then he could put the letter away before he came into the room. For a moment she delayed calling him. *If* she was going to call him into her she must forget the letter and get her mind fastened on to something else. What could she speak about as though it was the reason for which she had called him into her. If she began to think quickly like this and seem agitated, he would guess at once that she had read the letter and was trying to hide it from him. She stripped the sheets off the unmade bed and started turning the mattress over. She felt hysterical after the few minutes' hesitation and as though she wanted to laugh. "Evelyn," she called, "hurry—I've gotta stitch

in my side and this mattress is jest as much as I can lift."

She was laughing when he came in to her with relief that her call had seemed so spontaneous. She was bending over the mattress which she had twisted over in a round tunnel in the middle of the bed. He looked a little startled when he first came into the room, but then he smiled and gave her a hand with turning the mattress over. As it flapped down again flat, she said: "Thank *you*, maybe it was the talk of the sea that made me kinder weak."

He made no allusion to the letter; he did not show that it made any effect on him. He was a little quiet that evening, but he read, sometimes, after supper until late, never speaking, allowing her to go off to bed without saying good night. There was nothing to show that he was thinking over anything that might have been suggested to him in his mother's letter. She realised though, as she lay quiet in bed, that he could not read what had been put to him so plainly and forget about it, until something else had helped to obliterate it from his mind. And she could not forget either, what lay ahead for her in the future. The only way to solve any difficulty would be to think of—not her future, but Evelyn's, and that's what she couldn't

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do, however much she loved him. She concluded her thoughts with the half-hearted assurance: "I reckon I'm thinking of what my love for him brings to me as well as to him, but I can't help that."

She wrote to the Duncans and told them she was leaving Canada in a week's time. If either of them were in Redcliff would they let her know and she would like them to come and see her to say good-bye. She felt she would like to see Duncan: he had been too good a friend to have him drop out of her life. She wished there was another way of getting letters to him than directing them to the Athabasca for Edie Brown to handle before they reached him. She didn't want to lose actual touch with everyone she had known out here, though she needn't be thinking of them in this final way: for all she knew they might be returning in a few months' time. Once over there she felt Dawson might never want to return. She realised how much might depend on her. Unless his people approved of her, to live amongst them for any time would be intolerable, especially for Dawson. She was too sensitive to live with any intolerance: it might have been a subconscious fear of Mrs Duncan which had made her stand by her determination to move away from Two Creeks. With

strangers you could carry your head high and let them know you were as good as they were, but with some folks it seemed as though they could make you feel "under the weather," which was an expression of Dawson's and which she had got into the habit of using. Queer, how half the folks in the world seemed dependent on the other half for what came to them in the way of happiness or unhappiness, as the case might be.

Through all his life, with so much to fill it, Dawson had seemed to have missed something which would have made all the difference if it had been given to him. The something which Nobbie had given to him, and which he still cherished as a grown man, and which could have been doubled a thousand times over. It was what she discovered she could give him which might keep him wholly hers. However much she needed the same herself she would not let him know: she knew she would always have to give more than she received. He talked all the time of their return. He could not see that she should mind leaving a country where she had never known a home which could be called a home. He could not understand how a waste of yellow grass could make your heart throb, though maybe, only with the desolation that you had suffered with it. When he thought of Sherwood

it was natural that it called, even though he had left it to escape from it. The gardens, the lawns, the woods, the drive—there was not a part of it that did not hold his heart and make him feel that any other part of the world, and certainly such a part as this to which he had made his escape, was entirely foreign. To think that anyone might have a similar feeling in leaving this Godforsaken spot did not occur to him. She was being transformed day by day from being Hannah McCleod to Gretel Dawson, but only slowly, and this intermediate stage of her transformation caused her, now and again, a little misgiving. An exchange always holds a certain amount of risk and she could, at least, admit to herself that she was more at home with Evelyn Dawson than she could have been with McClelland with whom she had spent those few hours on her way into Redcliff. She had discovered something in herself of which she could never have dreamt, unless she had met Dawson. To have read and understood, in her own way, *Shakespeare's Tragedies* and other books of his, convinced her that she was neither disloyal or foolish to imagine she had been fitted for years into the wrong peg. Perhaps, later, when she would find herself more definitely, she could return and face the people who had meant so much to her

in the past with a freer conscience. She would wish in the same way to make Evelyn's family feel he had not married her because she might have used a little persuasion in a moment when he might not have been responsible for his emotions.

Dawson's spirits rose with every day that dawned. They packed the trunks together. Once, after fitting things on the top of one trunk as tightly as they would go, he looked up, his face red with his exertions, and said : " This is the best part of it I believe ; I feel like a kid going home for the holidays, but I know that when I am standing in the hall and I see them all there round me I shall get that confoundedly silly sensation of missing the principal thing that I've gone home for."

Hannah shut the lid of the trunk down and sat on the top of it. She said : " Now, for Mercy's sake, don't go saying things like that —I'll be there to pick up the pieces."

" You'll be shaking far too much yourself—you'd drop them."

" So I might and pick 'em up again. At the end of a week they'll think they've bought me along with the place."

" You *would* be grey-haired."

" That ain't a disadvantage to some."

" Ain't it ? "

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She looked up at him. "No," she said, not correcting herself. "I reckon some are glad when they've travelled far enough on in life from things that, maybe, they've been glad to get away from."

"Philosopher."

"Sure," she said, "the only thing to be, every time."

"Even as regards—well, a thing like marriage."

"Ah-ah."

"You'd think that, even if I ran away from you?"

"Sure."

She got up from sitting on the trunk. Dawson had locked and strapped it and now it was ready to be turned up on one side, ready to be labelled. He came up behind her and put his arms round her. He didn't say anything for a moment only crushed her thin body against his. "Are we philosophers?"

"I should say."

"How—may I ask?"

"If you've found any happiness in being married to me it's 'cause I was shoved in front of you like a plate o' Quakers' Oats that a child has put in its place winter time on the breakfast table, and gee, you've eaten it 'cause it was the only thing you knew you could get, but you haven't let yourself think of it that way."

"Because it isn't true. Don't you believe in fate?"

"Something's been mighty good to me—I don't know what you'd call it."

"Have you ever thought of what might have happened to you that night if I hadn't been the one to walk into Jeffersons? Perhaps you don't know that he has been in jail—I don't know how many times. The woman too—for waiting on the platform when the Night Mail comes in and going up to any girls that get out of the train and asking them if they've been sent to the Girls' Friendly Society and if so—she's the matron."

"Please don't talk about that."

"All right, I won't. But will you remember this? That I didn't go there again. Sometimes it is just the once more that takes sufficient decency——"

"Please, don't, Evelyn. For the Land's sake, aren't we packing up to go right home?"

"Say that again."

"Maybe it will seem like that when we get there."

"Of course it will."

"Any darn place would be home as long as you're there."

"Philosopher. I said so all along."

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He started to drag the trunk out into the hall.

Going out later, Hannah looked at it vaguely as though she could hardly understand what it meant to be standing there. A year ago she was fifty miles out on the Prairie living in a three-roomed shack on the side of a hill, pine trees at the back sheltering them from the winds that blew around them in the winter, and which shaded them in summer through the draughts, with a man who was guessed to be a half-breed, his mother or grandmother a squaw of the Blackfoot tribe in the settlement twenty miles south-east. She wanted to forget it but for all she knew it might be the one thing, one day, she might want to remember. And she guessed as long as she lived and wherever she went, she *would* remember it, whether she wished to or not.

CHAPTER XVI

THE following day the Mail would carry them east to Halifax. This last week she had spent in Redcliff had passed too quickly and yet not quickly enough. Sometimes when Evelyn was out and she was left alone in the bungalow she looked out of the window across the frozen river to the other side, where the white space of the Prairie stretched away in the direction of Two Creeks. When she heard the bells clanging in the distance down at the depôt she thought of the moment which was drawing closer when she would be seeing Redcliff move backwards out of her sight. She would never return to it again. She felt that. Yet, there was no one she could actually regret leaving except Duncan.

As he came into her mind the telephone bell rang and she somehow felt before she answered it that it might be he. He was ringing up from the Athabasca and wanted to say good-bye to her. She was aware as soon as she heard his voice how much his friendship meant to her. She might, even yet, stand in need of it. She told him to come up to

the bungalow because Evelyn might be home a little later on and she would like them to meet.

Duncan answered: "I don't know that I'm so mighty anxious to do that." He was thinking of her still as the girl he had kissed when they had parted the day of the tornado.

She said: "Maybe it'd be better for you not to come, but I jest wanted to know that we're as good friends."

"Sure, we are—what do you think?"

"I'm going a mighty long way away, Mr Duncan."

"That's jest why I rang you up—to say you'll be mighty welcome when you come back."

She waited for a moment. She knew that they would never come back. She tried to laugh through the telephone. "Maybe you'll forget."

He kept her waiting for an answer to that, then: "I'm coming up: I've got something to say."

She began: "Mr Duncan—Mr Duncan." But he had rung off and there was nothing to do but watch out for his arrival. She just didn't want a reminder that was all, only an assurance that here she was leaving someone to whom she could turn, in thought, from the other side. She had not long to wait. She heard his footsteps crunching on the

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snow and opened the door to him. He pulled his hand out of his furbacked glove and held hers tightly as though it *was* friendship and that alone which had brought him up to her. She said : " It's good to see you."

" It's good to see *you* : you're looking fine ; I wanted to make sure."

" That I'm all right ? You needn't worry. I started off feeling that life wasn't going to be too good —" She led him into the sitting-room. " But things turned for me. I took a job that, maybe, held a world of risk in it, but I had to risk something." She leant towards him. " Mr Duncan, perhaps I'm taking a bigger risk now. Evelyn's folks are the kind we don't meet out here : have you any idea the way folks seem to be in the old country when you're not quite the same ? "

He said, kindly : " There's only one way folks could seem towards you, Hannah, don't you make any mistake there. You'll be all right. I shouldn't have felt contented to have you go without asking what kinder feller was taking you off. He's all right, and if a good word can be spoken for a remittance man, well, that word is worth double. Try and bring him back, Hannah"—he went white round the lips—" though I reckon there's not much for anyone to come out here for these days,

but I'd jest like to think there was something that'd bring the two of you out again."

"There's no reason why not." She smiled at him. "I won't forget what a good friend you've been to me—you and Mrs Duncan—"

All the time she was speaking to him she was conscious of the difference between them which had developed in a way of its own since they had parted. She had appreciated him because of some superior quality he possessed which the other men had not got; but now she was conscious of Dawson's superiority. She could not tell why the phenomenon of superiority and inferiority existed to torment her. It was no wish of her own to think of men as being different because of who they were or herself either. If Duncan appeared as he did to her, perhaps Dawson was as conscious, in spite of his loyalty to her, of the difference between her and himself. She wanted to think as Steve had thought, that a man's worth was to be found in his soul. Perhaps, after all, it was the intangible thing for which she was in need herself, that these men lacked and most others besides.

She asked for Mrs Duncan. He answered, genuinely pleased to have her asked after. "She's ageing too quickly," he said, "that's the trouble with the women out here. The life uses them up

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where it hardens us and seems to keep the life in us. That's where, though it seems a good life in some ways, it's all wrong in another. There's that bunch of boys I've got out with me—they're kept busy, sure, but their hours off, what have they got to do? There's some that don't care, but when I get a decent lad out I sure want to do my best for him and it's for me to give him the lead."

"That counts for a good deal, Mr Duncan, for you to feel that way." She smiled. "I try to keep to Steve's way of thinking, however far he's gone away."

"Still, feeling's different to what you actually do, and it ain't always easy once I getta way."

"I reckon, I never heard anything too bad said against you, and women talk, as you know. There's not much that some of the women haven't taken the chance of telling me."

"If it wasn't that I'd be glad to think of you right here in Redcliff I'm sure glad you're getting the chance of seeing a good side of life."

She cleared her throat. "Maybe it won't be so good — what if it isn't? Sometimes I feel scared."

If she chose she could tell him of what Evelyn's mother had written in her letter, for she knew that she could trust Duncan, but it would be disloyal to

Evelyn, even though the confidence might relieve her mind.

“When you get down west you won’t feel that distance is so great after all. To think of going a long way off seems worse than it is when you’ve travelled a bit of the way.” He was assuring her all the time in a dead voice, as though he was saying something which he had learnt by heart and which he did not mean her altogether to believe. He was keeping his eyes on her in a hopeless sort of gaze and as though, if he brought any life to his assertions, they would change in their proof of optimism.

For a moment she imagined herself staying behind in Redcliff with him and not belonging to Evelyn any more. But that was absurd for even if she was not married to Evelyn there was Mrs Duncan who would go on ageing as Duncan seemed to stay a permanently middle-aged man. And she did not love Duncan. She loved Dawson with a sort of idolatry that was a torment, suppress it as she might. Duncan at last said he ought to be going. He stood up with his hands on his hips, as Hannah had often seen him stand in the corral inspecting the cattle on his farm. Hannah stood up too. “If I write, where am I to send the letters? I don’t much like the idea of Edie Brown getting them

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before you getta hold of them. Can't you think of anyone else ? ”

“ Sure. What's wrong with the Dominion ? Beasley'll forward anything.”

“ I'd sure like to know that I wasn't forgotten.”

“ You're asking me to let you know how certain sure you won't be.” He spoke a little impatiently, though knowing that it was a hidden fear of the future that made her cling like this to his friendship.

“ More likely I'll be forgotten.”

“ You've been a mighty good friend.”

“ S'long as you feel that—”

“ Sure I do. Tell Mrs Duncan that one day when I come back I'll ride out and see her. Somehow I haven't been able to come that way since it all happened. You get the boys to help her with the chores, Mr Duncan, so's she'll getta bit of a rest. Do you reckon you'll ever get back to the old country again ? ”

He shook his head. “ Couldn't stiek it : not unless I'd made enough to buy a place of my own ; but the slump's put that idea on the shelf.” He held out his hand. “ Don't forget us, and however far you go, remember you've got us still right here.”

“ However far I go I shan't find folks as good as you and Mrs Duncan've been to me.”

He began to stride out of the room and she kept

close to his side. She held his hand tightly as he was holding hers. They were conscious of a finality in their good-bye which neither of them dared acknowledge to the other.

A moment later she had closed the door after him and was surprised to hear herself sob. She choked her emotion down as the sound of his footsteps died away. She went back to the sitting-room and looked out of the window, but he had already passed out of sight. He must have gone down the hill at a great pace. It was a relief to have said good-bye. She was taking with her across to the other side an assurance that would have been more indefinite had she not seen him. But she was sorry for him. She understood more how he had appeared in the past as feckless to his wife's existence. If he had been faithless to her he was conscious of it, and that was more than most of the men were. They didn't care generally whether their wives lived on pity given to them by equally pitiful women or the hope that their wrongs would one day be remedied.

She was glad they would be leaving by the night Mail. Otherwise she felt certain Evelyn would want to sit in the observation car and watch Redcliff and the river stay chained to the place where they

belonged, while she sped away from them and left them for ever. They were to dine at the Reindeer and then go across as soon as the Mail got into the depôt. There they would hear whether the Mail was on time and whether they need hurry or not. Hannah hoped they would not have too much time once they got away from the bungalow. She did not expect Evelyn to realise what it was to leave the only place you had ever known when it consisted of a small Prairie town and ugly at that. She could never tell why he had made an escape to such a place when there were others to choose from.

She had woken that morning with the words from Mrs Dawson's letter bright in her mind. She thought she had erased them so that she would be able to forget them altogether as the days took them to fresh scenes. Sometimes she had felt she wanted to admit to Evelyn that she had read the letter and have his assurance that it was nothing to worry over. She wanted him to be angry with anyone who had thought such a thing of her now that she was his wife. She could imagine if she had married one of the men on the Prairie and professed affection for them, the fury she would feel if anyone hinted they could contaminate the children he might give her. But Evelyn had gone in to her when she had called him, quite unperturbed, and

he must have read by then what his mother hoped might be possible. She had been so relieved at his appearance that she had not thought of this before. She had not thought of how he ought to have felt, whether he knew she had read the letter or not. But then, she would feel his complete indifference for what his mother had written by the way he had come into the bedroom and helped her turn the mattress.

As they were about to leave the bungalow she took hold of his hand and drew him impulsively back into the bedroom. She heard the auto outside chugging as their boxes were being strapped to the back. By the light in the hall she scanned his face for a moment. He looked down wonderingly at her. He said, "What is it?"

"We've been happy here."

"Of course we have—but we aren't saying good-bye to happiness; we're taking it with us." He put his arm round her and kissed her hurriedly as he heard the driver outside hoot to let them know everything was fixed. She shivered as the cold blew in from the snowbound street. As they went through the hall Evelyn clicked the light off and banged the door after them. Hannah stepped into the auto and Dawson got in beside her. He tucked the rug round her legs and over his own knees. They started down the hill. He was returning

home. He slipped his hand under the rug and held hers. He was glad she was there ; quite extraordinarily glad and he wanted to tell her so. But the driver would hear if he said anything to her so he held her hand tightly and pulled her close up beside him. His mother's letter had disquieted him. He had destroyed it as soon as he could without Hannah's seeing him do so. It had made him feel that in spite of his absence away from them his people thought they could dominate him and suggest that abominable way out of what they might think had been a marriage of convenience, or rather, as they would consider, of inconvenience. Hannah leant up against him reassured after the queer momentary hesitation she had had in leaving the bungalow.

They drove through Main Street for the last time : the stores were lighted up and the lights flicked out the advertisements overhead. Two lights blinked simultaneously each side of the steps of the Athabasca. She imagined Edie Brown standing behind the counter playing dice with some guy off the last Mail that had come into the depôt. How long it seemed since she had borrowed the clothes of Edie in order that she might go and buy some clothes of her own. She had possessed nothing in the world then but the clothes which were damaged from her experience of the day before. She had

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had no money but the notes given to her by a stranger who had made her acquaintance the night before at Jefferson's brothel. That hadn't seemed the wisest way to make a start in life. Even now she could not bear that Steve should know the risk she had run with her eyes open. Perhaps no one could count her actions, since she had set out alone, as very wise, from the refusal of McClelland's offer of marriage to her acceptance of Evelyn's. But there might be something in Fate, as Evelyn had suggested, which drove you here and there to an ultimate ending. She was tempted to believe this whenever she remembered the moment when, sitting on the packing case, she looked up and had seen him standing there in front of her.

They had left Main Street now behind them and were nearing the Reindeer. Evelyn had lessened the grip on her hand and it lay impassively in his, all touch deadened by the thickness of their fur-lined gloves.

There were a good many people in the dining-room. The table at which they had sat when Evelyn had brought her there a few months back was booked. The chairs were tipped forward against the table's edge. The room was suffocatingly heated. But once sitting there opposite him, Hannah wanted to stay there for as long as they reasonably could. It looked different to the last

time they had sat in this room together because then it was July and the heat had been different to this, steamed out by radiators. Her throat had been choked and sore. She remembered still the agony of the smart it had given her to drink that first mouthful of water Evelyn had given to her. It gave her a queer protective assurance to sit with him in this place, with all those people round watching him give her the attention she needed. She reckoned if he sat like this smiling at her and asking her in that way what she would have, when he got home, his people would jest kinder feel they couldn't have hits at her as they thought they could in their letters. It seemed immense this abundance of loyalty he had towards her. She always thought of it as loyalty—not passion or even affection: loyalty was more dependable and she was glad that she realised that it was the uppermost emotion he felt for her. They were told in the middle of dinner that the Mail was on time. It wouldn't be long then before they would be going over to the dépôt and taking their seats.

They said good-bye to the few people who had grown to know Dawson quite well during his visits at the Reindeer. They were genuinely sorry he was going and told him that he must be sure and get back again when times were looking brighter. Things

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were bound to look up sometime and Redcliff would go ahead same as other towns had gone when times had been good. They had quite a send off : even the little foreigner who had cut Hannah's hair appeared in the vestibule and shook her hand warmly.

They crossed the track a few moments before the gates closed to allow the Mail through the dépôt. Once again Hannah felt glad it was dark and that she could not see too plainly the ugliness of the surroundings that had meant something to her in the past few months. A place which was connected with Steve, Duncan and Evelyn. She wished she had seen Riley again, but he had gone to Vancouver for the winter, to a brother. Say what people might, there were a heap of men you could pick out and pin your faith to : she reckoned women looked in the wrong place for the men they thought they should find. Without looking she had found men who had treated her as though she was worth considering. Too often, it was the women who had their heads screwed on the same way as the men, and then blamed them for looking in one direction.

The conductors were starting in to make the berths up as they got into the carriage : the curtains were already drawn to and people behind them struggling to get undressed. Children were being pushed along on their way from the toilets at the

end of the corridor. There were a few sitting either side of the tables between the seats, writing picture postcards so that they could be posted before the Mail went on its way. Others were playing bridge or looking at magazines. One or two women were knitting, winding wool with the skein hung over their arms, endeavouring to untangle knots. There was a ceaseless chatter mingled with a Spiritual the coloured conductor was singing softly as he pulled the upper berths down and inconvenienced the people who had been sitting underneath and who had not yet gone in to the second dinner. Some were peering through the window, first wiping the steam from it, jeering at the electric signs which seemed ludicrous compared to the signs of the bigger towns further west.

Hannah heard them : “ Some advertisement, eh ? Whatter bum show to put up.” How dared they ?

She was standing by Evelyn watching the conductor place their grips on the rack by the window. The steam was running down the glass in trickles. Queer to think you were going to sleep with somebody else a foot away the other side of the partition, and across the corridor, so you might hold hands if you’d a mind to. Presently, everyone who had got out on to the platform to stretch their legs was getting back and taking their seats or crouching on to the

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berths behind the curtains. It felt to Hannah as though the clanging of the bell on the engine silenced the beating of her heart, though in the stifling overcrowded carriage she could not realise this *was* a good-bye and undoubtedly for ever, to the first eighteen years of her life. For a moment she felt faint: she was unaccustomed to the heat to which the people of the towns were accustomed. She was used to the open air of the Prairie: the breeze blowing gently in her face, as it fanned the grass towards the ground. It came into her mind—the yellow of it and its gradual turning to brown through the months of a drought. The ground, as it appeared to rise and slope alternately as far as one could see. The splendour of the distance when it was covered in snow—the sun setting across it behind the Montana hills—the bleakness—the loneliness.

She closed her eyes and leant her head against the back of the seat. Above the clanging of the bell she heard the boys shouting to the cattle down in the corral and Duncan's voice above them all, yet speaking in gentler tones. She heard the intonation of Steve's voice as he murmured a psalm before turning out the light—the crackling of the logs in the stove as the degrees of frost fell lower and lower. The bell clanging again and somebody's voice screeching a message to somebody else's

momma—a reply coming that “they should say.” Whatever she was leaving—wherever she was going, she had nothing to regret—nothing. There was—sitting opposite to her—the one being for whom she lived and for whom she would die if it was necessary.

She was glad when their berth had been made and she was able to undress and lie down. The rhythm of the wheels on the lines, she found, was soothing. They seemed to be moving slowly and yet she knew they were travelling over mile upon mile of Prairie, occasionally passing small depôts such as Rowell, and leaving them behind, as places never seen before and never remembered. And yet, from any such places, people’s destinies might originate as hers had done.

Gradually the hum of voices died down as people settled to sleep in their berths. The heat made her drowsy and as soon as she laid her head on the pillow her eyes closed. She was hardly conscious of Evelyn lying down beside her. It meant so much to him, this journey. Perhaps to-morrow she would be able to adjust her mind to the newness of everything. She wondered how it must feel, to return home, to have all this precede one’s welcome. She had only known what it was to stay in Redcliff for a night or two with Steve and watch the shack—maybe with a little regret—draw nearer and nearer

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to them as they rode back towards it. It had meant that one went about the lighting of the stove with a renewed vigour and getting the water from the well with a song in one's throat because of the few days' relaxation from the toil of the Prairie. But Evelyn's home-coming would not be like anything she had ever known. If what he had told her was true, she at least had never experienced the disillusion that he had. Perhaps when they got a certain distance along she would stop thinking of what she was leaving behind. Goodness knew, there was little enough to leave, but it was there, however faint, when the future was as intangible as anything could possibly be.

She had one thing in mind: Evelyn must one day possess whatever it was which should bring him the happiness that should be his. There was nothing that must ever stand in his way. If she found that *she* ever did—well, she must obliterate herself, even though it would mean courage—that thought brought her back to Steve, of whom, perhaps, in these days she thought too seldom. Courage is the thing which you have to go on mixing into yourself like—like——.

The rhythm of the wheels on the lines seemed to catch hold of her words and reiterate them as they went along. Like the eggs you mix into a batter.

CHAPTER XVII

SHE slept late in spite of the hubbub of people's chatter and laughter. She was first conscious of the coloured conductor handing a tray between the curtains on which there was a pot of tea and two cups. Evelyn, wide awake was taking it from him. The curtain dropped again as he sat up and placed the tray across his knees. He yawned and said to Hannah : " I can never sleep in these confounded berths, the first night." He yawned again.

Hannah rubbed her eyes. " I reckon I was too tired for anything to have affected me."

" No wonder : you've been packing for umpteen days."

" 'Twasn't the packing so much—it was jest saying good-bye to it all." She was conscious, suddenly, of not having said good-bye.

" Good Lord," he said, " you don't mean to say you minded." It had never struck him that it could be so and he thought she must be joking. " Wait till you see Sherwood—you'll soon forget." He handed the tray over to her. She looked at him, startled, as though she did not wish to believe what

he had told her, and yet she realised that his words were undoubtedly true. She would forget.

She sat up and took the tray from him. "Anyway, here's a good cup of tea." She laughed so that he thought, after all, she had not been in earnest when she had said that it had cost her anything to leave that wretched one-horse town. He felt the sweeping urge to return to Sherwood too vehemently to think twice about the place where he had spent the last two years of his existence. He looked down on the fair head beside him. If it did not belong to the one woman for whom he felt he had always waited, he was sincerely fond of the owner and he felt that their companionship bound them together more than any desire or passion might have done. Perhaps Destiny did carve for one something out of life which one could not carve for oneself. If there had been nothing to prevent him he would have had Lois by hook or by crook, thinking her the only being in the world who could bring him happiness. And yet he had known and did know a certain content that this child brought him, an extraordinary consolation and confidence, though he knew that the actual alliance had various disadvantages. Since he had received that letter from his mother he had tried to forget the insurmountable task before him in having to convey to

them the fact that he knew nothing of his wife's antecedents. They would seem that if nothing was known of them, otherwise they would be ancestors, pure and simple, and would make all the difference to the people to whom he owed his own lineage.

And yet, between them, they might provide heirs to Sherwood of which any place might be proud. Why not? He was complaining to Hannah of having to drink milk in his tea instead of lemon, but he supposed, by the time he asked the conductor to bring a lemon, he would have settled off for another doze. It was useless to get along too soon to the toilets: they were always too damned full first thing. He asked her if she wanted a second cup of tea and if she did not he would place the tray on the ground—unless it was better to stick it up on the window ledge.

She did not like jostling side by side with so many other people at once. The scramble in the toilet with women trying to get to the wash-basins irritated her and made her feel that an enamel bowl on a table as she had used at the shack had been as good as having these large bowls with hot water steaming into them from the taps in this kinder place. However, she was not out to find fault and would get accustomed, in time, to this overflow of humanity.

The days passed quickly, though one would have thought so many hours spent in such small space would drag by. Evelyn played bridge with some people he had met on the train. Hannah sat a good deal of the time in the observation car watching the country speed away from under the carriage. The Prairie looked the same for days under its mantle of snow. One's eyes ached with the glare. She made friends with a woman from Calgary. She was on her way home to pay her folks a visit, she told Hannah. She had been out seventeen years : her husband had served with the Canadian Mounted Rifles during the war and had been wounded as soon as he had got to the Front. The tendons in his leg had been severed and he had walked with a stiff leg ever since. She had never minded as it had meant that he had never returned to the fighting line. There was an English woman with whom Evelyn played bridge and who seemed to take a lot of notice of him between times so that Hannah's first feelings of jealousy were aroused. She was surprised to find that love was not made of one ingredient such as she had imagined, and that the emotion this woman's attentions to Evelyn roused in her seared with greater intensity than the hunger for his love which she had felt before he had taken her in his arms. It felt as though someone

had rushed her at a great speed towards a danger from which she could find no protection. Evelyn gave no hint that he in any way responded to the woman, but he enjoyed her company and the company of other English people who were on the Mail, and his spirits were higher than usual. She knew, though she was changing every day from the girl who had left Two Creeks a few months back, she might never change enough to fit in with the life at Sherwood, though she had not the faintest idea what that life might be like.

Sitting in her seat, looking out over the snow as the Mail carried her towards Halifax, she was assailed by an overwhelming terror of what the future held in store for her and what it might hold for Evelyn as well as for herself. He might be put on the rack as well as herself : enough to shake even his loyalty. She might be able to bear anything that would bring suffering to herself but she could not endure that suffering should come to him.

When they reached Halifax they parted with most of the people they had met on the Mail with the exception of the people who had been playing bridge with Evelyn. When they said good-bye they asked Hannah and Evelyn to dine with them at their hotel and they would see what entertainment

could be found in Halifax afterwards. Hannah was relieved that the journey had come to an end. Her head buzzed incessantly from the drumming of the wheels on the lines and the ground seemed to rise and fall when she first got out of the carriage and stood on her feet. She would have a good rest when she got to the hotel. She did not feel an ordinary tiredness, but she felt she must get rid of the buzzing in her head before embarking on the boat the following morning.

When they arrived at the hotel they found that all the double rooms had been booked and there were only a few single ones left. These were on the top floor. Evelyn had started frowning and Hannah thought he was going to suggest turning away and going to another hotel. She said, before he had time to make any decision : " I reckon that won't matter any s'long as we've got beds to sleep on." Her head was buzzing and the ground seemed to tip her backwards. She swayed slightly and Evelyn realised she was looking white. He agreed at once. After all, it did not matter. It was his own fault for having this ridiculous " penchant " for the smaller hotels.

They got into the lift and the luggage they did not want taken upstairs was piled for the time being in the hall. Hannah went straight to the chair in

her room and sat down. She supposed it was being unaccustomed to travelling made her feel mentally tired and as though she could not bother about anything. Her suitcases were brought in and she started to open one in which she had a bottle of Eau de Cologne. Evelyn went off to his room which was at the far end of the corridor. Hannah poured a little of the Eau de Cologne on to her handkerchief and dabbed her temples with it. She'd feel better after a rest on the bed. She wished those people hadn't asked them out to dinner. Maybe Evelyn wouldn't mind if she didn't go. It was not only the journey which had lasted the five days from Redcliff, but the thoughts of what might face her at the end of the journey. And still more, what Evelyn might have to face on her account. She didn't want to go any further, mentally, into the future : she wanted to rest. She remembered the appalling effort she had had to make when she had pulled herself out of the river and plodded those miles into the town. The same weariness seemed to come over her now and she could not find the strength to further the struggle. She leant her head against the side of the chair and closed her eyes. She was walking along a plank and could not keep her feet on it. A floating sensation came over her and she felt relieved, for that had once

meant a journey was ended. There was a footstep in the room now and she felt herself being lifted from the chair, carried a step or two, then laid on the bed. She opened her eyes. Evelyn was bending over her.

"All in?" She nodded. A moment like this came into both their minds simultaneously. She kept her eyes open looking into his. Presently she put her hand up and drew him down close to her. "Evelyn," she whispered, "Evelyn, will they ever find out?"

For a moment he scanned her face. "They can't—how can they?" Then after a moment, "Even if they did, it's my picnic."

"That's about what it is, I reckon."

"There's nothing in the world to make you say that."

"I ain't so sure."

"I am."

"Do you know what I wish?"

"No."

"That we were back at the camp and I was jest giving you everything you could ever want."

"You give me that without being back at the camp."

She looked at him. "Will you mind meeting *her* again?"

He shook his head.

"I'm sorry for her."

"You needn't be. She's having a rotten time just now but it will soon be over and she knows how to have a good time otherwise."

"Is he bad?"

"He's got a few months, that's all."

"Gee, that's bad."

"Not for him—you think; ever since the war he's had hell and the poor old things have had to watch him. All the same, it will knock them over when it comes."

"Evelyn, do you reckon I needn't go around to-night. It's my head after the heat in the Mail. Gee, did you ever feel anything like it, it was just fierce."

"Of course you needn't go unless you want to—I'll back out as well."

"Why, no, I don't want you to do that."

"But they want to go to some sort of a show, though God knows what, in a place like this."

"Don't matter. I'll be asleep anyway."

"Sure?"

"Sure," She was looking up at him with an emotion that seemed to carry her to a tremendous height. Even lying there, on the bed, her head resting on the pillow, she felt giddy. She closed her

eyes and she felt them smart as tears rose to the surface. She could not quite believe that he was sitting there and that she belonged to him.

He sat for a few minutes with her hand in his and thinking deeply. His feelings for her were an anomaly which he could not explain. He had felt a little afraid of returning home having to present Hannah to his people, though he might argue for a century that there was nothing a family could do to you—especially when you were shortly to count for more than you had hitherto. They could make existence less pleasant than it otherwise might be, that was all. He could swear that having Hannah by his side made him feel more assured than he otherwise might feel if he was alone. All a little stupid, of course, but then it was a queer egotism explained when you had never brought your success, as a member of the family, quite up to the scratch. To his intense relief he felt he would not mind meeting Lois. He felt he would not experience any other emotion but pleasure when he set eyes on her again. Was biology the hellish cause for all one went through in life? If so, what a piffling excuse! Was one to believe in fate, spelt with a capital F, when one thought to relieve himself of an insufferable ache in his heart he had resorted to the sordidness of a place like Jeffersons and meet this

child whose soul had been a revelation to his very ordinary knowledge of what a soul might be. If it was all a conundrum he would try and solve it, and if he did not succeed he would have, anyway, learnt something from her which would always count to him for a good deal.

He knew that from the beginning she had tried to improve herself. He had watched her pause and recollect some phrase which, said correctly, might make a difference to him. What colossal arrogance; what overwhelming insolence to imagine anyone could improve on this wonderful handiwork of the Almighty's because their blood happened to be a bit bluer! Had blood any colour, or could it count when the soul was the only thing which for the moment was under consideration? The first time he had considered her was when he had sat by her, as he was sitting now, on the side of a bed. . . . That first time—on a bed in the most notorious brothel in a one-horse town in Western Canada. It seemed so miraculous to think that he had been the one to step into the store—which was only a camouflage for what it really stood for—and see her sitting there on the packing-case and rescue her from the callous caresses of some doped or drunken dago. As it all recurred to him he tried not to think of things that he wished would never recur to him.

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She had closed her eyes. He was looking down at her exactly as he had looked that night—not so very long ago. Fancy! if his people ever got to know. They would consider themselves outraged. They would look on him as one who had passed the leniency of forbearance. As the heir of Sherwood he would be expected to make reparation. He could not live for himself or to himself. That was why the survey camp had seemed such an escape. He knew now. With nothing but the sky above you and the shadow of a hill which seemed to envelop you when your day's work was done, you could sigh and forget that you owed man anything, even your people. But at Sherwood you were dependent on others for their mere dissertation on how you should fashion your destiny. And yet, if that didn't count, what did? What made him feel when he was at Sherwood that he wanted to touch and caress each stone of the house which seemed part of himself, and would belong to the flesh and blood which would one day count as his and this child's. If anyone could give them a heritage of courage and sacrifice, she could. But they would not think so at Sherwood. That was their trouble. Sherwood. What immediately surrounded them they counted as worth having; whereas it did not count, actually, at all.

How long was he sitting there thinking these impossible things out ? She had fallen asleep. He looked at his watch. He would have a bath and write a letter or two before going over to have dinner with these people he had met. In a little over a week he would see the spectre of his brother breathing in the last breaths of the air at Sherwood. The old people downstairs would have given the last twelve years of their lives in tending to a hopeless nerve-ridden lunatic who should have been, under normal circumstances, a healthy son begetting heirs, with a wife who had been deluded of everything she had hoped for and who dreaded, yet counted the days her husband lived, sitting by the window, a shrunken wreck.

How stupid to be thinking all this when he had more than a good deal to be thankful for. He leant forward and kissed Hannah lightly on the forehead. The contact of his lips on her skin brought him, with a sudden jerk, from his reveries. He sank down until his head was resting on the pillow beside hers. His weight fell across her and he felt no desire of relieving her of it. He wanted to lie there and to know nothing but that she belonged to him and that she would bring to him that curious assurance that her presence would at the moment when he was being greeted by his family on his return home.

She was breathing softly, sleeping after the journey which had tired her out. He wished he need not move but lie there with his cheek touching hers and the feel of her frailty under his weight. He laid his lips on hers to see if she would rouse and respond to his emotion, which as long as she was asleep lay dormant along with hers. She only sighed in her sleep and turned her head sideways on the pillow. He smiled and slid off the bed, covering her with the eiderdown which had become crumpled by him lying there beside her.

He took a last look at her and then crept from the room.

A little later a maid knocked and brought her in the menu. Evelyn had left orders downstairs that her dinner was to be taken up to her. She chose an omelette, a sweet, a sundae and a coffec. It would be brought to her in about half an hour. She said, in the meantime, she would have a bath and get into bed. She already felt a little refreshed from her sleep but her head still throbbed and there was the drumming in her ears. The maid turned on her bath and Hannah slipped off her bed and found her sponge bag in her suitcase and the silk dressing-gown—the first she had ever owned and which Evelyn had given to her. She asked the maid what

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time the passengers for the boat had to be ready in the morning. She was told seven o'clock. Those who were going would be called at six. The hill down to the wharf was steep and so frozen that it took a bit of a time to walk down. The streets had been like glass all day.

When she had put on her dressing-gown she went to the window and looked out. The docks were below and steamers lined up, bow to stern, the lights gleaming from the portholes. There was a quantity of black smoke coming from the funnel of one which Hannah supposed was about to leave the harbour. The air was clear and frosty : the snow glistened on the roofs and window ledges : the bells sounded on an occasional sledge though, more often, she heard the hoot of a passing motor as it went slowly down the hill. It felt queer to be in a strange hotel alone, without Evelyn.

She looked round the room and felt alone in more ways than one. He would be back in a few hours' time. Supposing he had gone for good and left her there behind ? She experienced a sinking sensation as though something was closing over her. What would *he* feel like if he found himself on the boat without her and knew that he had not to take her with him after all ? She wondered if she had ever given him a loophole to make his escape

whether he would have taken it. He had needed her because there was no one else to whom he could turn, but soon, he would have many to turn to, not only on arrival but he would meet others as each day went by, each day and each month, until perhaps he would meet someone who would take a real place in his affections and what would she do then ? She shivered. Why should she stand there and think things which only brought her misgiving and did not solve the difficulties which she might have to face in the future ? There was nothing she could do about it. She could not pack her things up and go back to Redcliff, it was too late and even if it wasn't, she couldn't do it. Perhaps that was the truth of the matter. True, it needed courage to stay by his side, but it would need far more to leave him and face life without him. She looked down on the harbour again. There was a slight swell and the smaller of the boats was rising up and down. Shafts of light escaped from the portholes and pointed like long luminous fingers across to the other side.

There were others, surely, in the world who might have to admit cowardice where too great a sacrifice might be demanded of them. Her love *was* sufficient. What more could be expected of her ? She might ask that of herself, over and over again came

with it a subconscious acknowledgment that there must be some definite gesture which one should make and which could be achieved only when one's love was combined with an unsurpassed courage.

Her bath was running and she felt relieved that there was something to which she must give her attention. She turned from the window. Standing in front of the mirror she put on a tight bathing cap. Her face was white and she imagined she looked startled as though someone had frightened her. Queer to think that the journey had taken so much out of her when she was used to knocking around. She wished Evelyn had not gone out : if he was somewhere near she would not have these imaginings which did not do her or anybody any good. She did not stay in the bath long and was back in bed by the time the maid brought her dinner up to her. She felt freshened and happier and calculated if she had a bit of a sleep after this meal Evelyn would be back and hold her in his arms. The thought of him overwhelmed her and the love she felt for him made her feel convinced that to bring him happiness she would sacrifice her own even if it cost her everything she held dear.

CHAPTER XVIII

SHE was first conscious of the scent of the pine-woods. She had slept soundly and had dreamt of many things and many people. Steve had been near her. She had heard him speak. He had smiled at her as though she had given him pleasure in some way. It was the scent of the pines which had awakened her gradually—the pungent smell as though the gum in them was burning and filling her nostrils. There was the drone of voices—or was it only one voice she heard. Perhaps it was Steve's, for he was the only one who had been near her in her dreams. He must be reading his Bible before blowing out his light for the night. As she listened his voice merged into another, a softer and smoother voice with a hint of amusement in it. She heard her name which was not really her name and which sounded strange. Gretel. It was extraordinary how strong the scent of the pines was and how it seemed to be stifling her. She opened her mouth and felt her throat smart. She must have been dreaming for months and months and not found her way after all, into the town after dragging her-

self up from the cutbank. The smoke must be drifting across to her even though the fire had gone out.

She sat up. The room was full of smoke. It was coming through the floor and as she realised it she heard the sound of crackling and cries coming now from across the corridor. She threw off the bed-clothes and jumped out of bed staggering against the wardrobe and hurting her shoulder. She opened the door and saw that smoke was coming up the staircase. Simultaneously, a bell began to clang out loudly and she heard doors opening and banging everywhere. She opened the door opposite hers and called out to anyone who might be in there : then ran along opening what doors were not already opened by the people who might not have woken up. Then she remembered Evelyn and fled down to his room at the end of the corridor. There was no sign of him. He might have gone back with those people to their hotel after whatever show they had gone to. Some children were screaming close by and a woman appeared in a door-way holding a baby in her arms. Two smaller children were clinging to her. Hannah went up to her and tried to make the children take hold of her hands. The woman cried : " There's another on the bed—he can't walk—for Mercy's sake——"

" Get to the floor below—there'll be folks that'll

help you with these—I'll get the little feller down." She picked up both children under her arms. The woman looked back into the room and called out to the child she had left on the bed. Hannah cried: "Hurry—I tell you I'll come right back for the other one."

On the floor below people were rushing out of their rooms, most of them in pyjamas. Their voices were deafening as they screeched blame on themselves for booking rooms in one of the oldest hotels in Halifax. A crowd waited by the lift but smoke had begun to pour through the iron work of the gate and they turned away, terrified. As they reached the top of the stairs the woman looked back and cried again: "For Mercy's sake!" Hannah seized a man who was on the point of rushing down the stairs and forced him to take the children from under her arms. "I'll be right down." She pushed the woman down the stairs almost on top of the man.

Then she turned and fled up the stairs, back into the room where the child had been left. He was older than the other two but he held out his arms to her, and as she went up to him she saw he was a cripple. She picked him up and made way through the doorway. The smoke was so thick she could not see the staircase but moved along

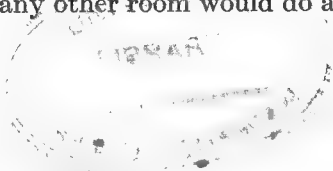
until she felt the banister against her hip. She turned the child's face towards her breast and as he clung to her she was suddenly aware of an ecstasy she had never known before. She took a breath and went down each stair until she found herself on the landing below. She was jostled by others as soon as she got there but kept close to the banister, letting her hip rub against it, holding the child tightly. Every now and again she took what breath she could and went on until, suddenly, she bumped against someone coming up the stairs. It was the man to whom she had given the other children and before she knew it he had taken the boy out of her arms and shouted: "I got him—don't you worry—the others are safe."

She stood still. Others were pushing past her. The ecstasy she had felt when she had held the child in her arms suddenly vanished and she was conscious only of the smoke which seemed to her again the scent of the pine trees and a thousand memories with it. Steve under the blanket and the fire smouldering as the dawn broke—the shadow of a hill which crept nearer and nearer a camp of tents and which seemed to drive her to take cover in a shack—a small shack in which there was only a bed and a packing case and near the bed a trunk in which there were books. She heard again the

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sound of a voice, a voice that droned the rhythm of something which was familiar. So familiar that the words became clear to her. The smoke was getting thicker and from below she could see flames as they mounted the stairway. Her throat was smarting unbearably. The words again and the voice she knew so well. "Give me my robe—Evelyn. Put on my crown—Evelyn—I have Immortal longings. . . ."

She began to step backwards up the stairs. The smoke seemed to envelop her and bear her with it as she felt her way, stair by stair backwards until she reached the top landing once again. She was hardly breathing now, just choking breath down her scorched throat. Evelyn. She was remembering his loyalty had never wavered. It would never have the chance if he returned alone. He would never have the chance of reproaching himself with any infidelity but feel thankful always that he had befriended a lonely child and given her back a little of what she had given to him. She was feeling along the wall with her hands but there was no getting away from the smoke. It blinded her as she groped her way along trying to find the door of her room. It was strange she should think of it, just as consciousness was leaving her, as *her* room when any other room would do as well.



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